

W. H. SMITH & SON'S
SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARY,

186, STRAND, LONDON,

AND AT THE RAILWAY BOOKSTALLS.

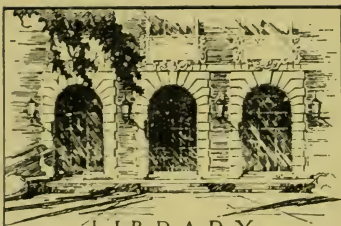
The person charging this material is responsible for its return to the library from which it was withdrawn on or before the **Latest Date** stamped below.

Theft, mutilation, and underlining of books are reasons for disciplinary action and may result in dismissal from the University.

To renew call Telephone Center, 333-8400

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

APR 13 1983



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
H817s
v.2

SINK OR SWIM?

A Nobel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“RECOMMENDED TO MERCY,”

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE ST. STRAND.

1868.

[The right of translation and reproduction is reserved.]

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
FANCY ROAD, N.W.

823
H817s
v. 2

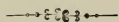
CONTENTS OF VOL. II.



CHAP.	PAGE
I. WHAT DID HONOR KNOW?	1
II. THE COLONEL LAYS A PLOT	16
III. UNSTABLE AS WATER	23
IV. THE HALF-REBUKE	41
V. "THAT WAS HONOR'S MOTHER?"	57
VI. THE COLONEL GETS HIS QUIETUS	69
VII. WAS HONOR GLAD OR SORRY?	80
VIII. JOHN WISHES THE PAST UNDONE	88
IX. HONOR FINDS A NEW RELATION	94
X. A GRANDMOTHER'S LOVE	115
XI. HONOR SHOWS A LIKING FOR THE "BELL"	122
XII. "THERE'S GOOD, AFTER ALL, IN HER"	130
XIII. LADY MILL HAS BUSINESS ON HAND	139
XIV. HONOR FEELS LIKE A "LADY"	151
XV. COLONEL NORCOTT FEELS PATERNAL	169
XVI. JOHN DECIDES AGAINST HIMSELF	178
XVII. HUMBLE LOVE	193
XVIII. DISAPPOINTMENT	213
XIX. LE PREMIER PAS	219
XX. SILENT SORROW	231
XXI. HONOR DECEIVES HERSELF	238
XXII. THE TURNING OF THE HEAD	262
XXIII. THE RECTOR COMMITS HIMSELF	274
XXIV. FAST DOWNHILL	281



SINK OR SWIM?



CHAPTER I.

WHAT DID HONOR KNOW ?

“ I HAD nothing to do with it ! By the God that made me ! by the—”

“ O sir, pray don't talk in that way. I never said—I—I never thought—no, no ; things would have been different, must have been different, if I had.” And the flush on Mrs. Bainbridge's pale cheeks (she was a sickly-looking woman) grew deeper still, through the violence of her protest.

“ She died very quiet, poor dear,” the woman continued sadly, while the Colonel stood passively near her, biting with an embarrassed air the silver knob of the cane that he had flourished so debonnairely such a very short time before. “ She wasn't much put about, thank God ; and it was a lonesome place, you know. Even the priest, Father

Donovan, him as you may remember used to have stations twice a-year in the village, didn't come to anoint poor Winny when she was dying. You see, they send for him so often when there's no occasion ; and—"

"But, tell me," said Norcott impatiently, "does this girl, John Beacham's wife, know anything about her parentage? Did the old people, your grandfather and grandmother, keep the child at Moyfeckan after poor Winny's death? I don't understand it all. Was there any money to support her—the girl, I mean? And where has she been living all these years?"

"Where has she been living?" retorted the woman, speaking for the first time in a very decided Irish accent, for she was excited, and in anger the old familiar brogue cropped out unchecked. "Are you asking me that? And are you thinking that my father's daughter's child would be wanting charity to bring her up?"

"No; not that. I know you were not poor people. Old Phil Moriarty was a 'snug man evermore;'" he quoted, with an abortive attempt to be facetious; "but, you see, I didn't know but what he—"

"Might have turned his granddaughter out of doors, and left her to starve, poor girl, because of your sin! Is that what's in your mind, sir?"

Faix, you should have thought of that before you took—but that's neither here nor there. My grandfather, respectable as he'd always kep himself, was not the man to turn his back on his own kith and kin, let 'em be never so unfortunate. It's not the way of our country-people, and it was not his. Says he, 'That grand jintleman was a schoundrel'—I beg your pardon, sir, I only repeat his words—'and he's brought throuble on as good a gurl as ever trod the ground; but it 'ull come home to him,' says he—'it 'ull come home to him one of these days;' and with that he'd groan, as he sat in the hearth, like a possessed man."

Again Colonel Norcott, who was growing very impatient, was about to interrupt her with a question, but she stopped him peremptorily.

"Afther my poor sister got a trifle over the effects of the medicine, and when the baby showed as if it would live, which it didn't at the first, for they had both been very near gone, my grandfather sent for 'torney Fagin, and bade him make his will. It wasn't much he had to leave, leastways to a gentleman it wouldn't seem much. There was the lease of the farm, which was valued, I think, at sixty pounds, and there was the furniture to be auctioned, and his stock. Well, altogether it came, as far as the two could

kalkerlate, to a couple of hunder pounds; and that grandfather took and left altogether—God knows I didn't grudge it to her, and she, poor dear, without a character, and a young child at her breast—to Winny. There wasn't much besides in the will, for I saw it myself; but there was *something*—something for you, sir." And she looked up at him with a curious sidelong glance, which struck the Colonel as not particularly pleasant—"yes; the name of Colonel Norcott, the airmy gentleman, as my grandfather called you, sir, was in the will; and he left you, written in large letters—I remember he would have it so—his curse."

Norcott endeavoured to conceal his annoyance by a laugh. "The vindictive old beggar," he said, "and he used to be such a jolly old boy, and an uncommon good twist at the whisky-bottle! So the young lady was an heiress after all, and left off bog-trotting, I suppose, pretty soon? Come now, Mrs. B., you used to be a good-natured soul yourself in those days, and I really want to know something about my old friends in those outlandish parts. In the first place, how did the ho-tel business thrive? and—about Bainbridge; it's so long ago since I saw him alive—never half alive enough, though, for such a fine woman as you—that its almost risky asking after him."

Mrs. Bainbridge sighed. She was, as the Co-

lonel remarked, a very good-natured woman, one sign and evidence of which good-nature was, in *his* opinion, taking compliments in good part, and not objecting now and then to a little harmless flirtation. In the days when the free-and-easy Colonel (a squadron of whose regiment had been despatched to those "outlandish parts," to do battle if necessary at a contested election) used to frequent the "best inn's best parlour" in the large western town of Ballyderry, Mrs. Bainbridge, whose husband was an attorney (law and liquor are not unfrequently in the ould counthry dispensed by the same individual), would listen with flattering smiles to the pleasant blarney of the Saxon and the stranger. "Ah now, Colonel!" and "Shure you're such a gentleman to talk," were the full extent of reproof which Mrs. Bainbridge's wifely sense of decorum urged her tongue to utter; and yet she was really a good woman, faithful, honest, and not in any degree forward or immodest. She was simply a little vain, and fond of flattering words. So agreeable too had the gallant Colonel contrived to make himself, that it needed all the unmitigated "schoundrelism" of which old Phil Moriarty had justly accused him, to open the then laughter-loving Mrs. Bainbridge's eyes to the true character of her unprincipled favourite.

But although her eyes had been thus effectually

opened, and albeit her anger against the destroyer of her sister's life and character partook even of the character of rancour, so deep was it, and so endurable, yet nevertheless the worthy woman could not resist the tempting offer of repeating to a fresh listener the epitomised history of her widowhood, and the migration from her native land which followed on her "good man's" decease.

"You see, sir, he was little better than a weight upon a woman's hands, was poor Tom. He never enjoyed his health for a day since he married. Something in'ard, the doctors said; but it's my belief they didn't know much about it. He was a long while lying; and though, if I was to die to-morrow, I could say with truth that I never *begrudged* him neither the time nor the throuble, nor yet the money he cost me; yet I couldn't but feel he was a sore handful; and he wasted to skin and bone! Such work as we had to turn him in his bed at last, you'd never believe."

"I daresay it *was* a bore," remarked Norcott, whose weariness at these details was almost past endurance, but who felt, nevertheless, imperatively called upon to express a proper sympathy on the occasion. "People had better die when they are in that sort of state."

"Well, and sure that's true, sir," rejoined Mrs. Bainbridge plaintively; "and die he did, poor fel-

low, like a lamb too, at last! Winny, poor girl, had kep up till then, doing what she could, which wasn't much, for she was never strong, for all the lovely colour that was in her cheeks; but when Tom died she just faded away as well. He was always kind to her was Tom, and she'd a grateful heart, the crathur. Little Honor (we called her Honor after grandmother) was scarcely two months old then; but grandmother was a rare one to bring up a child by hand, and when Winny was taken, the child went to live altogether with the old people, till they died, that is to say; and after that—she was a pretty little gurl of seven years old then, and I'd been lady's-maid to my Lady Kilkenny for six years and more—I put her to an English school, and had her taught the pianner and poetry, and the branches, thinking as she'd make her living as a governess in a genteel family; and so indeed she did, for she was two years, to a month a'most, teaching the little ones at Clay Farm, and earning her twenty pounds a year, and they making as much of her all the time as if she had been a child of their own. It's little I've seen of the child, poor thing—I thought it was better not; girls will be asking questions, and what was I to say to her if she did? Best let her think she was an orphan; so, even when I have been in the country with 'the family,' I

haven't let her know; for I couldn't have had such a young person as that in the housekeeper's room at Sir Richard's. So there it was—"

"Yes—and there it was—at that farm-house, I mean—that John Beacham fell in love with her pretty face and married her. I see it all now, and she is—let me see—not much over eighteen, eh?"

"I should think you ought to know as much of that as I do," said Mrs. Bainbridge, bridleing. "It's nineteen year come September since you used to meet poor Winny of an evening in Lord Kilkenny's demesne—and more shame for you to be desaving an honest girl that way. I declare you're not worthy, that you ain't, to be the father of such a sweet gurl as that, no, nor of such a pretty gurl, neither, for I don't see that she favours you at all, while she's as like her blessed mother as two peas in a pod."

"Like! I should think she was! Why, it's the same face! The same hair and eyes, and the same—"

"Ah! that's just it!" broke in the widow passionately; "and it's because I caught Colonel Fred Norcott looking in the *same* way at those pretty blue eyes and that beautiful hair, as he used to do at the poor girl's that's dead and gone, I thought it time to speak."

“But I didn’t know,” said the Colonel, reddening this time with legitimate shame and anger. “How was I possibly to know that—”

“No, no, in course you couldn’t; I allow that. And now, having been forced, as it were—which I didn’t want to—to say all this, all I have to ask is that you’ll just hold your tongue about the matter. I’ve always kep a good deal out of her way, poor little thing, because I didn’t want to be questioned either by her or by anyone else; she has heard I’m her aunt, and that’s pretty well all. While as for John—though to be sure, Honor’s pretty enough, God bless her! to make a man bear anything for her sake—yet it’s my opinion he’s just the sort not to be best pleased when he found out that his wife wasn’t an honest woman’s daughter. As for the old lady, I wouldn’t be in Honor’s shoes (from all I hear) for a good deal, if the truth came out in her hearing.”

The Colonel was silent for a few minutes, and while unconsciously cutting with his cane the tall fragrant blossoms of the “meadow sweet” that grew beside the path, he thought with his usual astuteness and rapidity on the reasons for and against his following the widow’s advice. On the whole—and he came to the conclusion far more quickly than would have been the case with nine out of ten of his sex who had chanced to be simi-

larly situated—on the whole, he decided that it would probably *pay* better to (*judiciously*, of course) allow his relationship to Honor to transpire. She was wonderfully pretty, and—but we need not follow this man through the network of reasoning, or rather through the tortuous underground plotting of his subtle mind. For all that he came of gentle blood, and had been reared under the roof of an “honourable” father, Frederick Norcott was, or rather had become, one of “the creeping things innumerable” which, among “both the small and great beasts” of mortality, do everywhere abound. He had lived too long upon his “wits” not to keep those weapons sharp, and to the last degree serviceable; a man he was, thoroughly confident in the inexhaustibleness of his own mental resources; for he had too often during the course of his *oiseau sur la branche* existence had to trust exclusively to those purveying talents of his, not to appreciate those useful gifts at their full value. He owed them a deep debt of gratitude for the good service they had done him in the mixed society of the New World, where he had been so fortunate as to hit the fancy of the “nice person” now raised to the state and dignity of—as she herself termed it—Mrs. Colonel Norcott, and who, though her grandfather had laid the foundation of his large fortune in a not over creditable

manner, was possessed of as many hundreds per annum as would enable Fred to begin the world afresh.

“Then you feel quite certain—as certain as you can be of anything—that this little girl knows nothing, guesses nothing, about her birth? You see I am obliged, a little for my own sake, though of course I should be careful for *hers*, to be particular. Perhaps you may not have heard—we poor devils, you see, in the colonies may marry and be divorced, may die and rise again, without anyone at home knowing anything about it; so very likely you may not have heard the astounding fact that I have taken,” and he laughed rather foolishly, “to myself a wife?”

Mrs. Bainbridge was obliged to plead guilty to the amount of colonial ignorance implied by this last suggestion. She did not, however, express any surprise that the Colonel at his time of life (a “household form” of words, under which the Colonel winced) should have decided to get married. She could understand, too, that for peace’ as well as decorum’s sake, that gentleman’s pro-nuptial peccadilloes had better remain in the background. No exposure, no punishment inflicted on the destroyer of her sister’s reputation, no mortification incurred by the man who had first betrayed and then left her young sister to die,

could bring the unhappy girl back to her lost life—no repentance, supposing, which was among the most improbable of human events, that Col. Norcott should exhibit signs of penitence, could make amends for the guilt and misery of the past. There was a time when Bridget Bainbridge, goaded by the memory of her sister's wrongs, would have striven hard for vengeance on the head of the seducer; but many a day had passed since Winnifred Moriarty had expiated her follies with her life. For more than eighteen years all that was mortal of the pretty Irish girl—the “heather-bell of Ballingarry”—had been mouldering beneath a black and rotting cross in the overcrowded burial-place of her native parish. Warm-hearted Mrs. Bainbridge had shed some very bitter tears when she looked her last on that dreary spot, and invoked, we grieve to say, the vengeance of Him who is as mighty to punish as to save upon the head of the absent profligate; but Time, as I was about to say, had produced its normal and blessed effect of softening the angry feelings, and making the rough places in human memories smooth. It is not often, I think, except in tales of fiction, that a wrong is treasured up through years upon years, in spite of change and absence, gathering intensity from the fermentation of the added heap. In real life, the principle of letting bygones be bygones is usually

found more convenient to carry out than the more Corsican one of “nursing one’s wrath to keep it warm.” That same wrath is apt to become a dangerous element to the individual in whose breast it is nurtured. There are enemies, besides, whose comparatively elevated position endows them with a certain immunity from punishment—from punishment, that is to say, at the hands of the lesser ones whom they have offended. It was some such immunity as this that Colonel Norcott enjoyed in his final arrangements—if arrangements they could be called—with Mrs. Bainbridge. In addition to the natural subserviency common to all classes of the animal man, it is hardly to be supposed that the excellent Bridget should have been for so many years housekeeper in a “good family” without entertaining a certain amount of that respect for gentlefolks *per se*, which is so decidedly indicative of her class. With all her strong natural indignation, all her innate, as well as authorised conviction that the man standing there before her was a villain from top to toe, she yet could not divest him in her mind of the false *prestige* with which mere quality is often unhappily surrounded. Colonel Norcott—a county gentleman—insolent, airy, and well-bred, was still, wicked as he was, to this respectable woman a personage; and being such, she gave him to understand that, as far as

his connection with Mrs. John Beacham was concerned, her tongue was sealed.

The Colonel expressed his satisfaction at this result of their conference. There was no good, that *he* could see, in raking up the ashes of the past, and it would be both wrong and cruel to distress Honor with the knowledge of *her mother's fault*. Of course *he* was very much annoyed at what had taken place, and if he had found that Honor had been in different circumstances—was in want of pecuniary assistance, in short—he would of course have done what he could to provide for her.

“And I hope that you and I will always be good friends, Mrs. Bainbridge,” he wound up by saying; “I’m always to be found. The Bell at Gawthorpe, or Bleak’s Club-house in the Hay-market, are sure places to direct to if you should want to drop me a line.” He held out his hand (taking credit to himself the while for his condescension) to Winny Moriarty’s sister as he spoke, but for the second time within an hour the offered civility was rejected by humbler, though purer, hands than his. In spite of the *apparent* forgetfulness into which a natural love of gossip had led her, Mrs. Bainbridge was not to be surprised into the condoning of her sister’s wrongs. “The Colonel” had a very pleasant

way with him, but that did not set matters right as regarded Winny ; and now that she had said her say, and prevented mischief in the event of Colonel Norcott "trying on" his old games with Honor, Mrs. Bainbridge was glad to make her curtsy and depart.

She had no intention of making herself known as a relation to the Beachams. As she had said to the Colonel, she had no wish to be questioned regarding her niece's parentage. Honor had never seen her since she herself was a little child, and need never know that she had spent an hour or two with the upper servants from Sir Richard Pemberton's place at Danescourt. As far as Mrs. Bainbridge was concerned, she deemed that only shame could accrue to herself and her family from any mention of what had occurred in those old, old days at distant Moyfecken. Honor was happily married, and so it appeared was the man who seemed to entertain so small a share of parental feelings regarding his child. The interview with that unscrupulous gentleman had not been a pleasant one, but it was over now, and Mrs. Bainbridge saw no cause to regret that she had informed Colonel Norcott of the near ties of blood which bound him to the pretty wife of respectable, popular John Beacham.

CHAPTER II.

THE COLONEL LAYS A PLOT.

MUSING on this unexpected discovery, Colonel Norcott sauntered slowly onwards under the spreading lime-trees, now in their full gush of sweetness, to that portion of the Park where the scene which was the only one of interest to him in that day's programme of sports was to be enacted.

On a broad portion of level road, about three-quarters of a mile in length, and bordered on either side by a grassy ride, it had been announced that a trotting-match between the respective horses of two sporting farmers would take place. The match had been made at the Bell Inn at Gawthorpe, one social evening after market-day was over; and Lord Guernsey, who was a liberal promoter of all legitimate "sport," had kindly consented that it should come off on one of the gala-days in Danescourt Park. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the two animals, on whose respective merits, nevertheless, a good

deal of money (for such an obscure occasion as the present) had been risked on either side. Colonel Fred—who was an *habitué* at the Bell, “hanging out,” as he termed it, at that highly-respectable hostelry whenever either filial solicitude or the world-known Gawthorpe races brought him to Sandysshire—took a very decided part in the affair, backing his high opinion of Farmer Scroop’s rat-tailed brown cob for more money than he could well afford to lose. This being the case, and experience on sporting matters—to say nothing of a natural tendency to mistrustfulness—having combined to put him on the *qui-vive*, the Colonel had his eyes well open to ascertain that all was on the square, and that the race, humble though it might be considered, was not going to be “sold.”

But for the expected “coming off” of this sporting event, it is more than probable that Fred Norcott would not have honoured the sports that day with his presence. He had no taste for innocent amusements—the hospitable and kindly owners of Danescourt, were very far, and well he knew it, from looking upon him with friendly eyes. Since the days when his family were “county people,” the days when old Mr. Norcott was a magistrate, a subscriber to the hounds, a man having authority, in short, with tenants under

him, society in general had grown to take a very different view of the Norcotts whilom of Lingfield. With humble Mrs. Baker, as representative in Sandysshire of the family honour and "respectability," and with loafing Fred Norcott, lying very decidedly under one of those social clouds which nothing but the sunshine of wealth and prosperity can pierce through and cast aside, it was scarcely surprising that that gentleman's associates should stand on a rung of the social ladder lower than that on which his forefathers had found themselves. Daily, hourly even, this fact was brought home, in not the pleasantest manner in the world, to the notice of the quondam admired and popular London man, who had returned, as he had hoped, whitewashed and renovated by his temporary absence, and by his marriage with a woman who, he had taken great pains to make generally known, was a colonial heiress on the largest scale. Very much disgusted was Fred, when he found that certain never thoroughly cleared-up accusations were still standing in array against him; and it was decidedly under protest that he took the lower room to which he found himself reduced. In the "sporting world," that world whose limits as regards "respectability" are so ill defined, Fred Norcott was still allowed admittance. He had committed

no flagrant act of dishonesty—above all, his payments of “debts of honour” had been both prompt and undisputed; though in what way, or from what fund, those debts were paid, his *confrères* never cared to inquire. As Fred was a good fellow so long as he paid his way, and possessed a little spare cash in his pocket, he might be seen hand and glove with certain persons of good standing, betting-men so called, amateurs of racing matters, who neither under nor above the rose made racing a *profession*, and who, falling in accidentally at sporting meetings with the Colonel, accepted his acquaintance as a matter of course, and thus, to a certain extent, linked him with the more high-principled and exclusive portion of the community.

The stumbling upon the surprising truth, as regarded his connection with John Beacham’s beautiful wife, had set Colonel Norcott’s busy brain a-working in good earnest. Of *feeling*, whether parental or remorseful, he could literally be accused of *none* on the occasion; but there might—it was an important opening—be something to be done in consequence of this tardy revelation; and Fred was too much in the habit of turning odds and ends to account, not to perceive at once that he must not exactly go to sleep on the knowledge that he was father-in-law

to the largest horse-breeder in the United Kingdom.

He had arrived at this decision (not a hair's-breadth beyond; for if Colonel Fred was not given to do "all things decently," he yet took time to do them prudently and "in order") when on emerging from the comparatively private lime-walk, he came suddenly face to face upon Arthur Vavasour.

"My dear fellow, I was never more surprised!" was his opening greeting. "Why, you told me three days ago that there was not the slightest chance of your being here."

"Quite true," Arthur said a little coldly; for he did not exactly encourage familiarity from the middle-aged *roué*. "Quite true; but a thousand things happen to make one change one's mind. The Pembertons, to begin with, gave a holiday to their servants, having decided, after finding what a fuss was made about this stupid business, to come themselves. I couldn't stay in an empty house, and—"

"And there's a pretty face, eh? that would bring you, I suspect, a good deal farther than from the Pembertons' here to look at it. I say, old fellow, I hear you're devilish spoony, and, by Jove! I'm not surprised. That little wife of John Beacham's is a glorious girl. One wonders

where such a creature was picked up. So deuced thoroughbred-looking, and all that kind of thing. I have been trying to find out something about her;" and linking his arm confidentially in that of his young friend, he drew him on in the direction of the course.

Glancing furtively at the young untutored countenance by his side, the man experienced in all the turns and twists, the vagaries and the madneses of the master passion, read in Arthur Vavasour's face that the time had come for him when

"That draught of sorcery which brings
Phantoms of fair forbidden things,"

had been freely drunk, and when all around seemed dark and lifeless that had not its root and being in the one fair woman that he loved.

The time, however, had not yet come when he could desire to confide in mortal man or woman the soft secret of his passion. A very young man, whose love is *very* fresh and real, cares little to discuss with another the delicate question of

"Whether his love loves him or no—
Whether his love loves him."

The mere sentiment of his adoration is sufficient for him when devotion alone, without any admixture of vanity, stirs the bright flame within. So Arthur Vavasour turned a deaf ear to the

Colonel's libertine allusions. To him there seemed profanation of his purely fair divinity in thus chaffingly alluding to her delicate loveliness. Neither Colonel Norcott's age nor his character, to say nothing of the little real intimacy existing between him and Arthur, could justify, he felt, the former in claiming the privileges of a confidant; and this being so, Honor's devoted admirer, without much preamble or excuse, changed the conversation abruptly to one that happened to be sufficiently interesting to both; for so long as Rough Diamond was first favourite for the Derby, neither Colonel Frederick Norcott nor the heir-apparent of Gillingham could be troubled by any lack of a subject for conversation.

CHAPTER III.

UNSTABLE AS WATER.

TIME was speeding away in the fair grounds of Danescourt; the trotting-match had been trotted, and the rat-tailed horse had won the race. Colonel Norcott was triumphant; and the *déjeuner à la fourchette* had put everyone—men, women, and children—more or less, into still higher spirits than before. As yet, Honor, not at all, as we know, to her surprise, had seen nothing of Arthur Vavasour. The latter had given tolerably truthful reasons for his change of purpose. “Circumstances over which” he believed that “he had no control” were accountable for his appearance at Danescourt that day; but that he had greatly rejoiced in silence over those same adverse circumstances was a corollary with which he had not found it necessary to garnish his statement. And yet the same reasons for his absence, which had before appeared to him such wise and prudent ones, were in as full force *now* as they had been

when Arthur Vavasour decided in his own mind that he would be insane to place himself at the same time within sight and reach both of his *fiancée* and the woman whom absence had only rendered still more dear to him.

“I will not go near her, I will only watch her from a distance; my beautiful Honor! my sweet fairy rose! And it shall be the last time, the very last! In a short time—ah, how very short!—the die will be cast; my fate will be sealed, and I shall be hundreds of miles away, with only the memory of my darling to link me with the past.”

Some such thoughts as these—selfish, self-pitying, wicked thoughts—were passing through Arthur Vavasour’s mind when Colonel Norcott met him on the course, and lightly talked to him of his love. And since that moment,—while joining groups of acquaintances, uttering unmeaning love-speeches into the ear of his betrothed, or endeavouring to assume an interest which he felt not in the fate of Farmer Scroop’s rat-tailed trotter—he never for many moments together lost mental sight of Honor Beacham, never ceased to remember that at any turn of the road, under any spreading tree—where smiles and merriment, and the ringing sounds of youthful voices, and the pretty colouring of woman’s dress gave life and

animation, he might chance to see his lovely Honor, and there perchance betray, by an unguarded word or look, to other eyes than Norcott's the secret of his heart.

But if Arthur Vavasour thought a good deal during those swiftly passing hours of Honor Beacham, that rather *insouciant* young woman did not (a fact which, had he known it, would not have greatly improved the temper of her admirer) trouble her pretty little head much about him. That she should not so have done (albeit Mr. Vavasour stood foremost in her mind as the finished type of all that was handsome, agreeable, and accomplished) is very easily to be accounted for. The scene to Honor was so deliciously new, and so untiringly interesting. Never, during that short life of hers, had she witnessed anything so gay, so grand, or so fascinating. In the dresses of the ladies alone she could have feasted her unaccustomed eyes for hours; and when to these was added the charm of their contagious laughter, and the latent enjoyment of knowing herself to be both observed and admired, can we wonder that Honor should scarcely have found time to greatly regret the absence of her friend?

Once, indeed, she thought of him; thought of him too very sadly, as of one who was far away, and whom it might be very long, years perhaps,

before she met again. It was the sound of the trumpets and trombones, the brazen serpents and the wailing cornets, that touched the minor chord of melancholy in her impulsive breast. The band had been (with the regiment to which it belonged) to the Russian war, and the perfume of glory, for those simple Sandysire people, hung—though many a year had passed since their return from “foreign parts”—about those military musicians still. The air they played was that sad, yet stirring parting one, that plaintive *Partant pour la Syrie*, which has so often fallen upon loving hearts as the knell of buried hopes, the echo of farewells between young loving hearts doomed never to meet this side the grave for ever. Honor listened in dreamy silence to “the lengthened sweetness long drawn out” of the suggestive notes, and then, in spite of surrounding merriment and the shouts of boisterous mirth, the tears rose to her long lashes, and but for very shame she could have turned aside to weep.

But it was only for a moment that the fancy of the impressionable Irish girl flew back to, and rested mournfully on, those farewell scenes still fresh in the memory of the young. The present was neither the occasion, nor was she in the mood, to be sorrowful. Although there was no delightfully agreeable gentleman to look his admiration,

and to elevate her by his ever-welcome sympathy to what that foolish Honor had begun to think her rightful place in the social scale, yet life, and especially life at Danescourt that day, contained for her a good deal that was pleasant and enjoyable. And then, if the thought did cross her mind that it would be very nice for Mr. Vavasour to be there, there came with that thought the recollection that, even supposing him to be among the goodly company assembled more as lookers-on than as participators in the sports provided, would it be likely that with Miss Duberly in the grounds, ready to claim her lover's undivided attention, *he* should have either leisure or inclination to waste time upon his humbler friend? The answer given by common sense to this query, though humbling, was very good for Honor, inducing her to rest satisfied with the companionship of her friends the Clays — the kind, hospitable, unsophisticated Clays — who were always in the seventh heaven of delight at seeing her; albeit the necessary farm business, and the four miles between the two houses, rendered the meetings with “darling Honor” not so frequent as they were desirable. John Beacham was always glad to welcome the Clays; and even in that noisy crowd (Lady Guernsey's *humble* guests were feeling much more at home since

the inner man had been refreshed by creature comforts)—even in that noisy crowd, he was quite satisfied of his little wife's safety and enjoyment, when his neighbour's well-brought-up children—including "big Affy," the eldest born, a steady lad of fifteen, who was already beginning to be a great help on the farm—were surrounding his merry, happy-looking wife, while she, "God bless her!" John sometimes said with a half-sigh, looked "a precious deal too young for him, the darling! playing there with the young ones, like the child she almost was."

On the present occasion, Honor, seeing her husband walk away with his friend Jack Winthrop (their two heads laid together in eager conversation on some subject, probably equine, that demanded the undivided attention of both), allowed herself to be beguiled (after seeing her mother-in-law safely settled in a shady corner with her faithful adherent Widow Thwaytes by her side) to a portion of the grounds which she had not yet visited, but which, according to description, was a perfect paradise of delight. In a shady dell, forming an area of about three hundred yards in diameter, a little quiet recreation had been, at the request of Lady Guernsey's children, prepared for the especial enjoyment of the small fry—*respectable* small fry, *sous-entendu*—who had

been bidden to the sports that day. There, on the short well-kept turf, was the miniature croquet-ground where the little Clays, with Honor Beacham as mistress of the revels, and a few other children, the belongings of some of the more important tenantry, were making the most of their holiday, and shouting gleefully to one another in their uproarious play.

Such a "good time," as the Yankees say, they had of it! Honor, the happiest of the happy, looking, as she stood there with her croquet-mallet in her hand, and stamping her small foot in playful petulance at the stupidity of her partner (the pickle Tommy of her governess-days), the impersonification of bright youth and unreflecting joy.

"Now, Tommy, how could you, you stupid fellow! Why, that was *my* ball; you had no business to knock *that* away. Now, mind what you are about, like a good mite, and you shall have some *goodie-goodies* when the game is over."

How pretty and animated she looked, while thus—acting on past experience of his character—exciting the recreant Tommy to rational behaviour by a bribe! That young gentleman seemed very far from amenable to reason. A merry, dark-eyed, gipsy-looking boy he was, bent upon tyrannous rule, while Honor, laughing at his tricks, was, with her two little gloved hands upon his

shoulders, holding him back with playful determination that the other little ones, as this judicious umpire said, might have a chance. She was for the moment entirely absorbed in the childish game. Tommy, though an especial favourite, was, Honor laughingly declared, "so naughty;" and then her womanly love of protecting the weak had been called into play by the piteous appeal of a blue-eyed girl of six, who tearfully claimed her championship against the encroachments of that wicked Tom.

It was at that moment, and when the fun was growing more fast and furious than the respective mothers of those unconventional guests would have thought permissible, that a small group of spectators suddenly appeared upon the scene. It consisted of Sophy Duberly, Horace Vavasour, and two of Lady Guernsey's young daughters, who had volunteered the to them delightful task of introducing Miss Duberly to where the tenants' children were, at a humble distance, aping their superiors at the fashionable game which the young aristocrats believed in as a *spécialité* of their own.

"It's such fun to see them," said Lady Margaret; "they haven't an idea how to play! Julia and I have been watching them without their knowing it, and they *are* so stupid!"

This noble maiden, who was ten years of age,

possessed a turn for satire (which quality her mamma prudently suppressed. "It does not do, you know, to encourage clever children to make remarks"); and it being gratifying, as we all know, to find anyone performing anything worse than we are capable of executing it ourselves, the little Lady Margaret was well-pleased to act as show-woman of the plebeian sports, as they were conducted that day. The approach of the party, walking slowly along the greensward, was not noticed by the croquet-players (so exuberant was the laughter that, not exactly, it is to be feared, under "sweet control of gracefulness," rang from their souls) till it was too late to look conventionally demure, was not noticed, in short, till Lady Margaret and her convoy were almost in the midst of Honor's not very promising scholars. She was the first to perceive them, and after a hurried glance, one of the bright sudden blushes that was the most engaging of its attractions spread over her beautiful face.

Sophy Duberly, like all those who saw Honor for the first time, was struck, nay almost startled, by her loveliness. She longed to ask Horace Vavasour the name of that peerless creature, but she was for the moment obliged to restrain her curiosity; for they were almost within earshot of the woman whom Horace knew so well by sight,

knew too as the *rival* of the gentle-natured heiress so soon to be his sister-in-law.

In common with all the world, the world at least of her own county, Sophy had heard of the loveliness of the well-to-do farmer's wife; and in common too with many of her sex she had at one time felt some curiosity to see the "Irish beauty" of whose marvellous attractions so much within her hearing had been said. But the fleeting curiosity had long since passed away, and the idea did not enter her head that the blushing girl before her was identical with John Beacham's bride. She looked so little like a "common person's" wife, so little indeed like *any* wife, as she stood there in her girlish grace, with her pretty hat, her diaphanous dress, and looped-up skirt. Poor Leech might have rejoiced over her as a perfect model of dainty damselhood; but I think that Miss Sophy Duberly stands excused for not, on the spur of the moment, surmising that Honor Beacham could be that commonplace and necessarily unideal creature, a farmer's wife!

The appearance on their playground of the formidable strangers, but more especially the unlooked-for advent of their little ladyships, produced a very serious effect on the spirits of the children. Suddenly, and as though struck by the wand of some mysterious fairy, their laughter was hushed,

their little hands hung down, and even their round bright faces seemed lengthened and less rosy.

“Go on; pray don’t let us stop you,” Sophy said good-naturedly. But it was of no use, the spell was broken; and in spite of Honor’s smiling attempts to restore tranquillity, and to make them feel at home, the tenants’ ruddy-cheeked children refused to listen to the voice of the charmer, even though that charmer was an affable young lady in one of Mrs. Heath’s prettiest hats, and who was heiress to some eighty thousand (at least, so said the voice of rumour) pounds per annum.

Honor was half-amused and half-provoked by the bashfulness which induced this signal failure. “They are such tiresome little things,” she said, with a shy smile, but not in the least awkwardly, and addressing herself more to Miss Duberly than to Horace. Her own natural good taste whispered to her that it was better (since that young lady had taken the initiative) not to stand there like a person either waiting for an introduction, or conscious of being too lowly placed to dare to speak before her superiors. “They are so little used to strangers; they can be merry enough though when they are by themselves.”

Horace was rather taken aback by Mrs. John’s

proceeding; for he had seen little of the world, and entertained rather old-fashioned ideas on the subject of caste. That pretty girl's relations too with his brother were, or rather had been, peculiar; and Horace, as the wise head of the family (whose doings and sayings he was, *tant soit peu*, given to criticise and condemn), felt it incumbent on him—a false position entails so many false moves—to be on this momentous occasion dignified and formal.

Lifting his hat gravely from his fair curls (a luxuriant crop of waving hair was the solitary beauty which he had inherited from his dead father), Horace Vavasour said, with a mingled stiffness and urbanity, worthy of the future “public man:”

“I believe that I have the honour of speaking to Mrs. John Beacham?”

On hearing this semi-interrogation, Miss Sophy Duberly, young lady of the world though she was, made a slight, though very perceptible, start of surprise. Although, woman-like, she had kept the feeling closely concealed within the impregnable fastnesses of her own breast, this young heiress had nevertheless experienced some of the jealous pangs which female flesh is heir to, on becoming acquainted—in a partial degree—with her lover's frequent visits to John Beacham's farm. That she, an heiress, and, consequent on that favoured

condition, a petted beauty, should really be slighted for the farmer's wife, or indeed for any wife, was an idea that never entered simple little Sophy Duberly's head; but there nevertheless was a soreness—if anyone had dared to call the feeling by the ugly name of jealousy she would have repelled the charge indignantly—about that spot in the young girl's memory, which was connected with that beautiful Honor Beacham, and therefore it was that she had not been able to repress that foolish little start, which would have betrayed to any keen observer a mind not entirely at ease. But although this was so, the kind feeling of the indulged heiress towards a person so unmistakably her inferior (as the warehouseman's daughter, amiable though she was, believed Honor to be) induced the bride-elect to attempt a task, in which, however, nature had been beforehand with her—the task, that is to say, of preventing Mrs. John Beacham from either looking or feeling, under these exceptional circumstances, awkward or ill at ease.

“I am so sorry we interrupted you,” she was beginning, when a voice and step behind her checked the words upon her lips. “Arthur!” she exclaimed joyfully. “Ah, I was sure it was you! I thought you would come! But how late it is!” And her two hands were held out for his

acceptance joyfully. His own were in hers, though, as Horace saw at once, he looked worn and worried, when he perceived, though she had turned away on his arrival, the presence there of Honor Beacham. Men, even the most practised ones, are, when compared to women, poor dissemblers; so it need cause no surprise that while Arthur Vavasour started, and displayed a momentary agitation, Honor, on the contrary, betrayed not the slightest sign or token of emotion. It might be that the very emergency of the case gave her courage to play a part, for she guessed at once, from the tone and manner of her greeting, that the affable young lady was Mr. Vavasour's promised bride, and — stronger reason still for showing a fearless front — *she*, the petted, prosperous wife, had no guilty feelings to conceal, no cause to shrink from the inquiring gaze either of friend or foe.

She was very glad to see her friend, but she would have been better pleased had their meeting been on horseback in the quiet lanes, or on foot in the old-fashioned home-garden, where the pinks and roses were in the full glory of their summer beauty. She had vaguely expected another meeting there—not yet awhile, but when Arthur should come home again, after the months she heard he meant to spend in foreign travel, and

when he would talk to her of all the curious sights that he had seen, and all the marvellous adventures that had fallen to his lot. Half in sadness, half in hope, Honor had indulged in all innocence this dream. She had grown accustomed to his absence as to an inevitable necessity; had taught herself to think of him as one to whom she had said (for the time at least) a last "farewell;" and behold! there he was again,—tall, handsome, with those tender caressing eyes looking, despite his future bride's presence, into hers, and the hand, the long-lingering pressure of which she remembered, alas, too well, holding, for one *speaking* second, her own within its clasp.

"We have been interrupting Mrs. Beacham, who was good-naturedly amusing the children," said Horace. "They were as merry as any little beggars could be, weren't they, Lady Margaret? before we came, and now they look as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths."

"Won't it?" said Arthur, laughing—he was always good-natured to children, and especially to those that he had seen Honor pet. The little Clays he was acquainted with, both personally and individually, and it was even on record at the farm that the young Squire had given that ne'er-do-weel boy Tommy his first lesson in the noble game of cricket. "What, tired already! I never

saw such idle brats! Here, you Tommy, run and fetch the balls."

But here Honor interposed. She did not want the children to be troublesome; besides, the voice of conscience within her whispered that Arthur Vavasour was in duty bound, so soon after his arrival, to devote himself to his *fiancée*.

"You are very kind, Mr. Vavasour," she said; "but I think that the little ones must be tired; and Tommy," stroking his swarthy cheek kindly as he leant against the skirt of her fresh muslin dress, "is a bad boy, and mustn't be spoilt."

Perhaps Arthur understood her, for he said no more about the croquet game, nor did he, beyond a parting bow, respectful and commonplace, take any notice of her departure, with little Tommy clinging to her skirt, and the small blue-eyed girl, whose champion she had been, holding with all the force of her tiny fingers Honor's hand in hers.

"How pretty she is," said Sophy, when they were out of hearing, "and so well dressed and well behaved, too! She made quite a graceful curtsy as she went away. I wonder where she learnt it."

At that moment Sophy was utterly devoid of any jealous feelings towards Mrs. Beacham. Hers was a very frank and unsuspecting nature, and

moreover, what was there to fear? Had not her dearly-loved Arthur been instigated in his choice of her by love alone—a comfortable fact made evident beyond dispute by the brilliancy of Mr. Vavasour's future prospects? In less than four years he would be one of the richest commoners in England; how, then, could she entertain any of those misgivings which are so apt to haunt the couch and damp the happy hopes of young ladies in Miss Duberly's position? But there was yet another cause for the mind at ease with which "little Sophy" was blest, when, leaning on the arm of her betrothed, she paid a not unwilling tribute to Mrs. Beacham's beauty. Ladies, more especially perhaps wealthy ones, are often rather apt to overrate the influence of their ladyhood *per se*, while the loveliness of women in a rank inferior to their own is shorn in their opinion, and for the mere reason of that inferiority, of half its power to charm. The coldness, too, of Arthur's parting salutation was well calculated to reassure one so inexperienced in human wiles as "old Dub's" guileless daughter. How was she, poor child, to guess that, while *her* heart was throbbing with almost wild delight at the unexpected happiness afforded by his presence, he, the faithless one, while giving no outward signs of aught save pleasure in her beaming smiles and tender words,

was thinking only of the simplest, easiest way in which to make his escape to Honor, and turning over in his mind the least perilous words in which to reveal to the wife of his dead father's friend the fact that he adored her!

CHAPTER IV.

THE HALF-REBUKE.

“ I HAD not the slightest intention of coming back—God knows I had not—when I went away; but I am the weakest fool. I told myself again and again that I was mad, and worse, to come where—where you are, Honor;” and he drew a long breath as the word came hesitatingly from his lips; “but it would not do. The more I tried to forget, the more I remembered; and the oftener I told myself that I *must* not see you, the more some evil thing within me urged me on to come.”

Honor had listened to him hitherto in silence; partly through surprise, and partly too because of that pitiable shrinking which so many women, especially young women, experience when it becomes their duty to hurt the feelings of men who venture to address them in language that ought to be forbidden. If we could look with any degree of perspicacity into the intricacies of female motives, I think it would be found that

there is no inconsiderable amount of selfishness in this fear of wounding the susceptibilities of a too daring admirer. The chances that the hero of a hundred such fights, when wounded and worsted in the last encounter, will betake himself to fresh fields and pastures new, is not altogether an agreeable one. The sternly virtuous female, left alone with the sole reward—not always a sufficing one—of an approving conscience, is (and she looks forward to this dismal *fait accompli* with no reassuring glance) not precisely in a cheerful position. It is never pleasant to be forsaken—never consoling to be abandoned to the society of a dull, unappreciating husband, or, greater evil still, to the company of a woman's own thoughts, the more especially when that woman has allowed herself to listen to the voice of the charmer, and has grown accustomed to the flattering attentions of an ever awake and devoted *soupirant*. So the foolish wife—a well-intentioned one, possibly, in spite of vanity and its consequent shortcomings—temporises, deliberates, puts off till a more convenient season the vindication of her matronly dignity, unconscious meanwhile that her feet are on the brink of a precipice, and that the avenger of guilty thoughts is treading swift behind her.

Neither the absence of moral courage, the dread of giving offence, nor the very natural ob-

jection to the loss of an agreeable admirer, are diminished by the fact that the admirer in question is the lady's superior in the social scale; and it is more than possible that had Arthur Vavasour been a farmer's son, Honor would have found comparatively little difficulty in expressing the indignation which she was well aware she ought to feel on listening to words which were scarcely less than a declaration of love.

"I haven't offended you?" he said, looking anxiously at her half-averted face. "I thought we were friends; I am sorry, so sorry, if I have vexed you, but you *must* forgive me. It is so difficult, so impossible, to see much of anyone—I mean anyone like you—without—without becoming stupidly confidential; and I could not—indeed I could not—help telling you how I had missed you when I was away. You see, I am so strangely situated, so—"

He stopped; it was such dangerous ground that on which he had begun to tread: he on the very verge of matrimony; and, as it appeared on the face of things, so entirely guided to that verge by his own wishes and inclinations. Honor looked up at him in surprise.

"You are going to be married," she said coldly. "You told me so yourself, and I have seen the young lady that is to be your wife. She

is rich and pretty, and looks nice and kind. Why do you say that you are strangely situated?"

"Why," said Arthur impetuously, "because I should never, no, not for one single moment, have dreamt of marrying Miss Duberly if I had not been driven to it by—but," he went on with a hard bitter laugh, "it sounds too ridiculous to say by what. You would not believe now, Mrs. Beacham—you, who know so little of the world, and of what is called *business*, and of human nature—that I, whom people in general think so much to be envied, 'heir to such a splendid property'—young, prosperous, everything that is most delightful—should be—don't laugh if you can help it—marrying for money."

Again she looked at him, but this time with eyes full of pity and distress.

"How strange!" she said softly. "No, indeed, I never should have thought that; I always believed—I always fancied—"

"That I was one of those jolly fellows that can do what they like, and have everything their own way. How wonderfully you, and everyone else are mistaken! I should just like—no, I shouldn't, it would be such a bitter shame—to have the whole business shown up. I know I must seem such an awful screw sometimes, such a confounded cur! People must wonder why I

don't subscribe to charities and asylums, and to the hounds; and, now—why I marry this girl,—this heiress, who,” he continued as if talking to himself, “is no connection, has no beauty; while I—well, in the common course of nature, may expect to live a few years longer—to a rational age that is—for what is called ‘settling down.’ The truth is”—and here he lowered his voice, although there was no one within hearing, to a whisper—“the truth is, that I have no inclination, no ‘call,’ as they say, to marry. If Miss Duberly were the most beautiful creature that ever breathed, I should feel the same. It is now three months since I engaged myself to Sophy Duberly, and since then”—with a glance full of meaning at his companion—“I have had time to discover that on her account, as well as my own, I have made a grievous and fatal mistake.”

Arthur had truly said that Honor knew but little of the world. She had heard and read scarcely anything of love and lovers, but her woman's instinct warned her, as it would have warned any delicate-minded woman, that this confidence on Vavasour's part was one of which he ought to be ashamed. Nature had given her a loyal heart, and it was *not* loyal—there especially, and almost as it were within earshot of the girl who trusted him—to confide to her his re-

pugnance to a marriage from which he owned he was to "suck out no small advantage." Her judgment might be warped by her pity and by the pride she took in Arthur's companionship, but nothing could, in her eyes, totally excuse him; and moreover she was too thoroughly womanly not to feel some compassion for the girl who was to be the joint victim of Mr. Vavasour's necessities.

It was this compassion, this truly feminine feeling for one whose sorrows she was so well able to understand, that prompted Honor's reply, and encouraged her to be brave.

"I don't like to hear you talk in this way, Mr. Vavasour," she said, her heart beating rather quickly as she summoned all her resolution to her aid. "It isn't right—indeed, indeed it isn't. If you do not love this poor young lady, you ought never to have said it—to me—to anyone—not even to yourself. What good *can* it do now to say such things? Nothing—you know it can't; and besides, you will be happy, I am sure you will, after you are married—I—"

"Are *you* so very happy?" he said meaningly, and stopping in his walk to look into the depths of her violet eyes. "Are you certain, from your own experience, that happiness *must* follow after marriage?"

She turned away. "You have no right to ask these questions," she said hurriedly. "Mr. Vavasour, I *ask* you—beg you not to say such things to me! Why will you do it," she added imploringly, "when you know how much it vexes and annoys me?"

He was quieted in a moment; brought for the nonce, by the sight of her unfeigned distress, to a sense of his misconduct, and said quite humbly:

"I am very sorry; I will not offend you again—never! But at least let us part friends. We are quite near the people and the tent now. Give me one moment before you go back to be happy. Only say that you forgive me; say that you will think kindly of me, and wish me well when I am far away."

"I *shall* think of you—I do wish you well," she stammered out, not relaxing her pace, but advancing steadily towards the place where, about ten minutes before (for her interview with Vavasour, long as it has taken to relate, had occupied no greater space of time), she had left that, in her own opinion, important personage, Mrs. Beaucham, seated under the branches of a spreading lime-tree, listening to village scandal from the lips of a congenial gossip.

"O, there is milady at last," the former exclaimed, as Honor, escorted by Mr. Vavasour,

advanced slowly towards them. "You've been a pretty time away, Mrs. John; and here 'ave I been looking for you everywhere."

She spoke very crossly, an irritability occasioned not only by Honor's short absence, which the old lady had magnified into five times its actual length, but by the "incivility," as she called it, of Mr. Arthur, who, instead of staying to say something "pretty," had, after making what she supposed he considered a "fine bow," taken himself off to some of his "great acquaintances;" a slight which Mrs. Beacham did not appear very likely soon to look over.

"I'm sorry I went away, and sorrier still if you've been wanting me," Honor said good-humouredly. "Mr. Vavasour wanted to show me a tree—such a beautiful one!—I forget its name; but if you would like to see it, I could find the way again. The branches all feather down to the ground, and the leaves are so wonderfully green! I shall ask John to have some at the Paddocks."

"Humph! I don't fancy that John will care to indulge you much with anything when he hears of your goings-on."

"Goings-on!" repeated Honor almost mechanically, for she was too much astonished by this sudden attack to answer coherently. "I

don't quite understand—really I don't. I did not know I was doing wrong when I walked a little way with Mr. Vavasour. I would not have gone for anything in the world if I had thought that you or John would have minded it."

At that moment John himself, looking a little warm and discomposed, strode up the rising ground towards the spreading lime-trees under which the old lady, hugging closely her wrath and jealousy, was grimly waiting his approach. John was the kindest-hearted man alive. He would not wantonly hurt the feelings even of an enemy (always supposing him to have owned such a commodity); but Honor had not been married three months without discovering that her husband was what is called "hasty," and that in those exceptional moments when he was a trifle "put about," the wisest plan was to leave him alone till he should have recovered himself. Mrs. Beacham, however—whether owing to the absence of perceptive qualities, or from an idea that her son was not too old to be spoilt by over-indulgence—went on different tactics, and generally (at least so it appeared to Honor) chose the occasions when poor John was not quite himself to "touch him up," as the good man would himself have said, "on the raw."

"Well, John, I must say you've taken your time," the old lady, in conformity with this judi-

cious practice, was beginning; but her son, who, as a rule, was accustomed to let his mother "have her fling," stopped her further speech by an authoritative wave of his hand, while he said in a louder voice than he had ever yet used to Honor (they were comparatively alone, for the gossip had moved away when matters begun to look serious between Mrs. John and the old lady):

"I've had a pretty dance, I have, this hour and more. Catch *me*, that's all, ever coming to their tomfooleries again! Not I, indeed—no, not even if the Queen upon her throne was to be at the head of 'em!" And, in corroboration of this spirited resolve, John Beacham struck his stout stick into the ground with rather more of the strength of his good right arm than the occasion warranted.

"Why, what's the matter, John?" Honor said, amused, as any girl of her age might have been at his words and action. "What has anyone done to put you in such a pet?" And, half in reparation of the wrongs, slight though they were, which she was conscious of having done him, she stole her arm through his, and looked up with an air of pretty entreaty into his face.

The sight was gall and wormwood to his mother. To do her justice, she really had talked and thought herself into the belief that Honor—

this girl taken, as it pleased her to say, out of charity, and without so much as a "smock" to her back—was behaving undutifully and ungratefully to the husband who had bestowed upon her so many and such unmerited blessings. Her unjust prejudice did not go the length of persuading her that there was anything "really wrong" in her daughter-in-law's conduct; but that Honor was vain, fond of admiration, and given to the liking of having "men about her," Mrs. Beacham entertained no doubt. It was high time too that John, who was so ridiculous about Honor, should have a *little* idea of what she really was. Not that *she* wished to cause anything of disagreeableness between them. John was married—more was the pity—and he must make the best of it; but it did not follow that something mightn't be done to put poor John upon his guard, and to show "milady" (the satirical old lady's ironical *petit nom* for her daughter-in-law) that she wasn't going to lead that unsuspecting John altogether by the nose.

"What has been done now, John, to put you in such a pet?" Honor said, little surmising that *she* had either act or part in her husband's evident annoyance.

He looked for a moment searchingly into her honest eyes—eyes that had never deceived him

yet, and in which he had yet to learn *distrust*. Something that he read there reassured him, for he softly patted, before he answered her, the hand that rested on his arm.

“It isn’t much that *you* have to do with it, my dear, I reckon, after all,” he said, drawing a long *pouf* of satisfaction, after which, for his still further solace, he wiped his hot forehead with his handkerchief. “To tell you the truth, though, I thought at one time you had; and the man is such an unmitigated scamp!”

Honor coloured to the roots of her fair hair at this uncompromising epithet. For a single instant she thought that John was speaking of Arthur Vavasour; and, despite the corroborative evidence of her own ears, a sudden pang of anger against her plain outspoken husband shot through her brain. In another second, however, the current of her ideas was checked; for John continued: “How these fine people can allow such a fellow as Colonel Norcott to come inside their doors passes *my* understanding! A man that has a way of looking at ’em that no modest woman ought to bear; and then there’s the things he’s known to have done, and the — But I’m not going into all that. Someone told me he was married and going to reform—a thing I won’t believe till I see it; but in the mean time he’s trying it on to scrape ac-

quaintance with me. Sent me a message by Clay's eldest little chap, to say he should be glad before I left Danescourt to have a few minutes conversation with me—the impudence of the fellow! And yet I'm curious now, bad as I think of him, to know what he can have to say. I wasn't over civil an hour or two ago to the fellow, so it's odd, ain't it, altogether? He never said where he'd be neither, nor where I should be likely to find him; and the odd thing is—and what *did* put me out till I came to think for certain it wasn't true—one of the little chaps that I asked if he'd seen the Colonel said that—hang him! you may well look alive, mother—he had been walking about among the trees with Honor there!”

“How absurd!” Honor said. “My dear John, I never set eyes on him after you told me who he was.”

“Yes, indeed, I can answer for *that*,” put in Mrs. Beacham. “Honor has been better amused, John, by a good deal than in looking after Colonel Norcott.”

“Looking after” and “better amused”—what did it all mean? John was not the most perspicacious of mortals, yet even he could perceive the something in his mother's speech which meant more than met the ear. After all, what is easier than to stir into a blaze an already well-laid fire?

while to "hint a fault, and hesitate dislike," are means well suited to raise a storm; and is it not too sadly true that in the simplest *sounding* words, the kindest and least-designing nature can, if his mood be attuned to suspicion, sometimes read a volume?

Intensely as John Beacham admired his wife's beauty, he had, somewhat strange to say, been awake for the first time that day to a sense of its effect on others. His wrath—the natural wrath of a man and a husband—had been grievously stirred within him at the sight of Fred Norcott's bold stare into Honor's modest eyes. He had noted the crimson flush that made her look so passing lovely, and feared—not without good cause—that the hardened profligate, who had never had the grace to hide under a bushel his solitary talent (the truly Mephistophelian one of beguiling fond and foolish women to their own destruction), would discover in Honor's rising colour only another proof, if proof were wanting, of his own irresistible power to fascinate. At that moment—so unjust does personal annoyance often render even the best amongst us—John felt half angry with his wife for this additional proof, had proof been wanting, of a delicacy and reserve which repelled with indignation the coarse incense offered for her acceptance. It certainly was wrong on John's

part; but then you must remember that he was not a fashionable husband—was, in fact, only a clod, as Colonel Norcott's might have said; and being only a clod, he may be excused for holding certain anti-Mormon and old-world ideas. For instance, this stupid, selfish fellow, entertaining the barbaric notion of keeping his wife's beauty for his own delectation, would, I fear, have strongly objected to seeing that well-conducted young woman join in the “voluptuous waltz”—

“The only dance that teaches girls to think”—

while the faintest suspicion that, even in a dream (an involuntary indiscretion suggested by the example of the upper ten thousand), wife of his might be capable of putting in an appearance at opera or ball in the dress *à la mode*, which, for want of a proper name, we will call *costume de Paradis*, would have taken away honest John's breath to entertain. An *exhibition des beaux arts*, in the shape of his fair young wife's bust and shoulders, for the benefit of amateurs, would have been simply shameful in the eyes of that unsophisticated horse-breeder; and this being the good man's turn of mind, it was with something of irritated jealousy that he took up his mother's words, inquiring of her thus by implication what Honor had been about.

“Looking after Colonel Norcott! I don’t understand what you can mean, mother; I—”

But before he could proceed any further in his inquiries, he was interrupted by a slight tap on the shoulder, and by the voice of the man whose name he had just uttered, whispering in his ear :

“I am glad to have found you at last, Mr. Beacham; and I shall be glad if you will step this way, and allow me the favour of a few minutes’ conversation.”

The words in themselves were courteous enough—too courteous, perhaps, as spoken to one whom Colonel Norcott believed to be his inferior. There was condescension mingled with their graciousness; and John, despising as he did from the bottom of his heart the man who uttered them, followed very unwillingly, and with a tolerably ungracious air, this agreeable profligate to a short distance under the branching trees.

CHAPTER V.

“ THAT WAS HONOR’S MOTHER ? ”

AFTER Colonel Norcott’s short interview with Arthur, and the decision to which he had arrived regarding the extent of the latter’s insane passion for Honor Beacham, the astute and thoroughly unprincipled man to whom that unsuspecting young person owed her birth very soon made up his mind to impart, with certain reservations and under the seal of secrecy, the history of Honor’s birth to the husband who was so entirely ignorant of his young bride’s antecedents. For more reasons than one it was his object, and for his interest, to keep a hold, as he would have termed it, both on Arthur Vavasour and the quondam owner of the Derby favourite. To obtain such a hold, he had planned, and thought, and plotted ; and now (it really did look as if Providence was about at last to favour him) there turned up, without an effort on his part, the very thing that was required to set the wheel of fortune briskly

turning in his favour. But with all his effrontery, and in spite of his much-boasted *savoir vivre*, Colonel Norcott did not feel quite at his ease as he strode along the greensward with that honest John by his side. Now that he was on the verge of making his confession, it did not seem quite so easy as it had appeared at first to reveal to a moral and *possibly*—for he knew very little about John's principles and professions—a religious man that little episode in his bygone life in which the horse-breeder was, although he remained in ignorance of the fact, so deeply interested.

He had made up his mind—solely from interested motives—to disclose to John Beacham the fact that he, Fred Norcott, was the father of his wife. He felt no shame (in the abstract) for having so long neglected the daughter who owed to him the very doubtful blessing of her birth. Had Honor been a plain girl, coarse-featured and large-footed, it would have been long enough before Fred Norcott would have taken the trouble to own his paternity; but being, as she was, beautiful exceedingly, and withal possessing that indescribable air of good breeding without which loveliness loses half its value, the man who knew so well how to turn “circumstances” to good account saw at once that advantage might accrue to himself through the agency of his

neglected child. Had the man whom he was about to make his confidant been one of his own class and kind, Norcott would, instead of awkwardness, have experienced a comfortable feeling of satisfaction while revealing the history of the past, as that history was connected with the pretty Irish girl. It was not a new story, neither did its details differ greatly from the most ordinary and commonplace records of, alas, the commonest crime that is or is not made public, as the case may be, in the dismal registers of misery and vice. But, though neither new nor striking, Fred’s story was still one which, told in his lively fashion, would probably have been listened to greedily enough by the lovers of such piquant narratives. The dark shades—there generally are dark shades in that description of story—would have been softened down as a matter of course, but the facts, as the Colonel would have put them, contained enough to interest, without having recourse to the lachrymose. There was Winifred to describe—“such a glorious girl, by Jove!” And “then, you know, such a number of fellows had tried it on, and failed!” By the ruffian’s own account, too, how fond this woman, whom he had left to die a miserable death, had been of him!—“would have gone through fire and water for me, by George! *That* kind of girl,

you know. But what is one to do?" appealing to his friend's sympathy with a slightly injured air, as though aware that the aggressive nature of a woman's fondness is a legitimate ground of complaint against that weak and troublesome sex. "What can one do in cases of that sort? Nothing, that I know of, but *skedaddle*; and that's a bore sometimes, if one happens to be fond of the girl, which one isn't, you know, nine cases out of ten."

But though Colonel Norcott could have talked cheerily and by the hour together to his co-mates on this and similar themes of probably mutual interest, words did not come so readily to his tongue when his only auditor was a man who would probably see neither a pleasant jest nor a subject for self-glorification in the betrayal of a young and trusting girl. For a moment, so embarrassed did this free and-easy-man of the world find himself, he more than half decided on seeking some other pretext than the real one for the interview he had sought for; time pressed, however, and no other suggestion offering itself, he was fain, *nolens volens*, to pursue his original intention, and make what is called a "clean breast" (though Heaven knows that *his* would be dirty enough after any amount of sweeping and garnishing) to straightforward, unsophisticated John Beacham.

“I want to speak to you, Mr. Beacham,” he said confidentially, “on a subject which—er—er—is one that you cannot fail to be—er—er—interested in; and, at the same time, that I—” he grew more fluent when it was a question of himself—“have very much at heart.”

He paused. It was a fairly-rounded period, and one of which he had no reason to be ashamed; but John, who did not seem greatly struck by the merits of this exordium, contented himself for all reply with making a stiff and decidedly unpromising bow. There was something both of defiance and contempt in the action, and it roused Norcott to the immediate unfolding of his secret.

“You will be surprised at what I’m going to say,” he began, stroking his under-lip the while with the smooth gilt knob of his dandy bamboo walking-cane. “Decidedly surprised, I’ll go bail; and so was I myself two hours ago, when I heard what I’m going to tell you. Had no more idea of it, upon my soul and honour, than an infant.”

“I beg your pardon, Colonel Norcott,” said John hastily, for his impatience at the other’s delay was beginning to get the better of his politeness. “I should be obliged if you would say anything you have to say to me at once, for I—”

“O, nonsense! Stop a minute, man; why, one would think you had the devil and all of

business on your hands, or else that you were in a hurry — by George," he added playfully, "I believe it's *that*! — to look after your wife."

The colour deepened visibly on John Beacham's always ruddy cheek at this coarse allusion to the delicate girl, whose beauty he was perhaps fully as capable of appreciating as if he had belonged to the Travellers', and worn a coat manufactured by Poole.

"Sir," he said, mastering his passion by an effort which nothing short of his fear of rendering his wife's name a theme for public gossip would have rendered possible, "Mrs. Beacham is not, in my presence, to be spoken about by strangers. I have no wish to be rude, none in the least—but—but as neither my wife nor I desire your acquaintance, you will allow me," raising his low-crowned wide-awake about an inch from his head, "to wish you a good-evening."

The answer to this broad hint that the interview might be considered at an end was a low laugh, which, to John's exasperated ears, sounded very like an insult.

"One lives and learns," he said provokingly; "and some day, when you are as old I am—not that there's so much difference between our ages—I say, if it's not impertinent, how old, may I ask, are you?"

John could have “punched the fellow’s head,” as he said afterwards, at that moment with the greatest pleasure in life. He was the last man in the world to be sensitive on the score of his age. The whole universe might have known, for what *he* cared, that he was thirty-seven; but he did not choose to put up with impertinence on that or any other subject from Colonel Norcott. Before, however, he could make that resolution known in words, his free-and-easy interlocutor was off at another score.

“What was I saying? O, about finding out things; that, however, is neither here nor there, so we had better come to the point at once. What I propose asking you is, whether you did not notice my looking rather hard at your wife when I passed her an hour or two ago.”

At this apparently wanton insult John lost his temper altogether.

“Now, by G—!” he was beginning, while his clenched fist came very near in his strong excitement to Fred’s well-curled whiskers. But the latter did not give him time to proceed.

“Come, now,” he said, with a composure which was in striking contrast to the other’s look of concentrated passion, “keep yourself cool. It’s a bore when a man flies off in that kind of way. You can’t suppose I meant to insult your wife. Ridi-

culous! But husbands are such fools! The reason why I looked at Mrs. Beacham—but first let me ask you one question: do you know anything of your wife's family, of her connections? or did you take—I beg your pardon—a pig in a poke, and trust to thingummy—Providence, I mean—that everything was right?"

John hesitated ere he replied to these home questions. They had diverted the channel of his wrath, and had aroused the dormant spirit of curiosity within his breast. Here, perhaps, was the once earnestly wished-for opportunity of learning something concerning his dearly-loved Honor's birth and belongings. It was singular, certainly, and not wholly satisfactory, that the channel of information should be a person for whom he felt so much dislike and contempt as Colonel Norcott. But because he both detested and scorned the medium, it did not follow that he should reject the offered intelligence—intelligence, too, which he felt perfectly convinced, both from Colonel Norcott's manner and the singular step he had taken, was not altogether a matter to despise. In many respects at least, so decided John Beacham, he would be happier for discovering some particulars of Honor's parentage. He was aware that his mother did occasionally (John little guessed how often) flout his little wife con-

temptuously, and talk “at her” in the way that women have the skill to do when aggravation is their aim and object. The romance attendant on mystery goes for nothing with women of Mrs. Beacham’s age and stamp; whilst a something nearly akin to disgrace is inseparable in their minds from a birth which is neither recorded in the parish register nor made honourable mention of in the fly-leaf of the family Bible. But gladly as John would have listened to any hints calculated to throw a light on his wife’s antecedents, John Beacham yet shrunk with very natural repugnance from betraying, in Colonel Norcott’s presence, any marked interest in the subject. To disguise that interest was, however, a task far beyond his very feeble powers of dissimulation; nevertheless, the would-be diplomatist considered himself not wholly devoid of what he, in his simplicity, would have called “gumption,” when he responded after the following fashion to the fast London gentleman who had volunteered to address him on the sacred subject of his wife:

“You’ve asked me questions, sir, which I consider that no man, unless under very particular circumstances, has a right to put to another. Whether there are or are not those circumstances remains to be shown; but if there are not, all I can say is that you had better by a good deal have

kept your tongue quiet in your head, instead of speaking of what didn't in any way concern you."

The effect of this exordium was not precisely what John either expected or intended, for the Colonel, making a movement as though about to turn on his heel, said carelessly,

"O, if you take it in that way, I've no more to say. If you choose to answer my questions, I may, perhaps, be induced to do you a good turn. You are a man I should like to oblige, but you know as well as other people, Beacham, that one gets riled, disgusted in short, by being spoken to in that tone."

John, who was good-nature itself, and very ready to believe himself in the wrong, was a little moved by Colonel Norcott's half-reproachful tone. After all the man *might* mean well, improbable as it seemed; anyway, and for Honor's sake, it might be as well to listen to what he had to say. He reopened negotiations, therefore, with an apology:

"I beg your pardon, Colonel Norcott," he said; "it was not my intention to offend. As for my wife's relations, she hasn't many that I know of, any more than I have myself; but"—and here he remembered certain expressed longings on the part of Honor to learn something of her *dead* parents, which prompted him to add—"but I don't say that I wouldn't—more for her sake than my own

—like to gather some particulars about her friends. She’s an orphan, that we know, but—”

“But supposing she wasn’t an orphan,” put in Norcott, looking his auditor fixedly in the face; “supposing she had a father alive; and supposing that her father was a gentleman—a man who—Well, come now, I’ll tell you the story in a few words, and you may make what you can of it. Some eighteen or nineteen years ago—gad, how time flies!—a young fellow with eyes in his head, and a heart, as the poets say, in his ‘buzzom,’ was quartered for his sins in a country town in that blessed country Ireland. There was nothing earthly for him to do; no society, or anything of the kind. As for hunting, that wasn’t to be had for love or money; and, to make matters worse, there was rain, rain—rain from morning till night. Now I leave it to you, as a sensible man, to say what, under heaven, in such a case was to be done, and whether it isn’t your opinion that, all things considered, it wasn’t a lucky thing for the poor young fellow when he contrived to fall in love?”

John Beacham, feeling called on to make some reply, muttered something to the effect that, being placed in so unfortunate a position, it was perhaps just as well that the gentleman in question should have lighted on his legs in so providential a manner. Whereupon Colonel Fred, apparently

satisfied with the rejoinder, continued swimmingly the thread of his discourse :

“The girl he got spoony on was devilish handsome ; fair, with large blue eyes ; the kind of beauty you hear about a good deal oftener in an Irish ‘countryman’s’ house than you have the good fortune to see. She’d a grand figure too, and, if she had ever worn stays, which of course she hadn’t—they never do in those diggings—Miss Winifred Moriarty would have been something worth looking at, by Jove !”

“And that was Honor’s mother ?” John said, very sadly, and as though talking to himself ; for already over his young wife’s birth there seemed to fall the shadow of a great shame, and the proud lowly-born man—prouder than many of the exalted ones of the earth, who too often take such matters as affairs of course—shrunk away, as does a wounded man from the sharp touch of the surgeon’s probe.

“Yes, that was Honor’s mother, and—well, man, haven’t you begun to guess ? I think you’re rather slow—the girl that Fred Norcott—meaning *me*,” he added airily—“was more awfully spoony on than he was on any woman in his life.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE COLONEL GETS HIS QUIETUS.

I SUPPOSE it must be inferred that John Beacham *was* slow, for certainly the Colonel's revelation took him entirely by surprise. For a few moments that feeling, joined to one of extreme anger and contempt, kept him silent, and then he said, in a tone which Norcott, hardened as he was, found it difficult to bear patiently,

"I should never have thought that a man would have found it so easy to own himself a villain; for you are a villain, Colonel Norcott, whether you are, or are not—what I imagine you mean to imply—the father—" and his big honest heart throbbed as though it would have burst its bonds—"of my wife."

"I am her father, as surely as we stand here together under God's heaven," Norcott said almost solemnly; "and, being her father, I have perhaps some claim to be treated civilly. I can excuse a good deal from a man in your situation,

a little struck on a heap, too, as you must have been, but I can't allow of any bad language; and if you attempt anything of the sort again," he went on passionately, and losing sight, in his indignation at what he considered John's insolence, of his own interests, "why, you will have to be taught how to conduct yourself before gentlemen. In the mean time, I have only to say—"

"You will say nothing, sir, till I have spoken—nothing till I have told you my mind about your behaviour in this miserable business! You think, perhaps, because forsooth you call yourself a gentleman, that I am to be glad, proud even maybe, of this—this connection. But I swear to you, by my honour as a man, that I am nothing of the kind; nay, so far am I from that," and he drew himself up, and set his strong white teeth firmly together, "that I would rather know my wife to be the daughter of the poorest man who walks the earth, if so be he was an honest one, than the child of such a gentleman as you—one whose name is a byword for profligacy and dishonour, and whose blood is black with the taint of sin and shame!"

He was blind with passion, and half maddened by a sense of the dire disgrace that had fallen upon the wife of whom he was both so proud and fond. The object, however, of that tremendous

vituperation was not one to accept so bitter an affront with calmness. Though slight in appearance, he possessed considerable muscular power, and, like many of his sex, the sense of being endowed with personal vigour above the average lent the impulse to revenge himself for personal indignity with a blow. Already his hand, clenched and rigid, was raised to strike the man of low degree, who had so insolently abused and braved him, when John Beacham, whose blood was at boiling-point, seeing the action, quicker than thought intercepted the blow, and with his thick ash-stick hit his adversary a blow upon the head that would have felled an ox.

The man—Honor's father (John thought of *that* when it was too late)—sank to the ground, as if he had been shot through the brain, and lay there—it was an awful sight to his assailant—without sense or motion. In a moment, every angry feeling hushed, and with a terrible dread at his heart that he had done a deed never in the course of the longest life to be repaired, John bent over the man whom he had so lately despised and hated, and laying his hand upon the breast of the unconscious profligate, sought anxiously if any precious signs of life were yet remaining there.

To John Beacham—a man tender-hearted in

his softer moments as a woman—to one who, like the good-natured, simple-hearted farmer, had gone through life at peace with all men, and with a conscience void of offence towards God and towards his neighbour, it was no light thing the sight of that apparently lifeless form lying prone upon the greensward, stretched there—killed, perhaps—by *his* impetuous hand! Pale as a corpse he lay there—that well-dressed, overbearing London gentleman, who so lately—God forgive him!—had boasted of his besetting sin. His fair hair—it was the colour of Honor's, and the thought that it was so flashed through John Beacham's mind even in that, to him, unparalleled moment of horror and suspense—his fair hair, which made him ever appear so much younger than his years, lay dank and wet over his cheek, and was matted down over the left temple by the life-blood that was slowly oozing through a ghastly wound. At the sight, all poor John's presence of mind deserted him. He lived in peaceable times, and in a peaceable parish, so that his experience of such ugly gashes was extremely limited. In Colonel Norcott's livid colour and in that sluggishly dripping purple gore he read, as it were, a sentence of death, and his blood ran cold at the sight.

“Dead! My God!” he exclaimed frantically; “and I, Heaven forgive me! have killed him!”

With a vague instinct, desperate as seemed the case, of seeking aid, he was rushing away from the fatal spot, when a groan from the wounded man arrested his steps.

In a moment he was by his victim's side again. If the apparently dying man would but give signs of life, would only recover sufficiently to say that John was not a murderer by *malice prepense*, the latter felt he could freely forgive the past. Once more he leant anxiously over the prostrate form, and once more counted the feeble pulsations of the faintly-beating heart, and this time not wholly without finding comfort; for, after a few more minutes, the head of the prostrate man was slowly raised, and he stared round him with a stony and bewildered gaze.

"You are better, sir—I am sure you are," John whispered eagerly. "I am sorry—so very sorry I hit so hard—"

"Hush! Fetch a doctor—will you—and—the girl;" after jerking forth which few words (for he paused between each, and seemed to speak with difficulty) Colonel Norcott fell back again to all appearance inanimate.

John never hesitated for a moment as to the propriety of obeying these urgent—for aught he knew, dying—behests. His own conscience was so sorely smiting him for that deed of blood, that

any act of reparation, any deed of penance, however painful, which could have been imposed upon him, he would have cheerfully undertaken.

The first persons whom he chanced to meet, while hurrying in search of medical aid, were his mother and his wife. Frightened by his white face and agitated manner, they stopped and questioned him, John only finding breath to reply incoherently,

“For the love of God, don’t hinder me! I’m going as fast as I can for a doctor for Colonel Norcott.”

“But what *has* happened? What *is* the matter?” persisted the scared women, who felt instinctively that something more than a common accident to a man whom he disliked had so disturbed John’s usually placid temperament.

“The matter!” repeated John wildly, while he hurried on even faster than before. “The matter is, that he is dying, and that I have killed him! Now be quiet, both of you, and don’t make it worse by screaming. I didn’t mean to kill him—you don’t suppose that—I might almost say, though I’m not going to—that it was an accident, and—but I remember—I’m losing my head I think—he asked for you, Honor—wished to see you before he died.”

“Me! What can I do? O, John—”

“Ah, yes! You don’t know—God forgive me for it all, and for hating him as I did! Mother—yes, that’s the best way—you walk on sharp, and send the first lad you meet for Mr. Kempshall, and bring back people to help, and brandy—anything, while I say a word or two of this to Honor.”

The old lady went her ways unwillingly enough, seeing it was only natural that she could crave to hear John’s secret; nevertheless, there was consolation in the thought that she was the bearer of exciting news, and she stepped out briskly towards the point in the distance where the pleasure-seekers, intent on their own amusement, remained in utter ignorance of the deed of blood that had been done, as it were, within a stone’s throw of them. Happily for the worthy woman’s peace of mind, the idea of any blame being attached to her son never occurred to her for a moment. She was too old for the fixed beliefs of years to be rooted out without difficulty and labour from the soil in which they had grown and flourished. Mrs. Beacham had not known her well-beloved boy through so many years of close and uninterrupted intercourse as a just and humane, as well as a God-fearing, man, to have her faith so easily shaken now. John’s self-accusation, therefore, passed away unheeded on the summer air, or was only remem-

bered as an evidence of strong excitement very natural in times of sudden danger and distress, when the nerves are overstrung, and words bereft of sense rise, as it were, spontaneously to the lips.

Meanwhile John, after drawing Honor's arm within his own, hastily retraced his steps, she keeping pace with him with difficulty, to the shady glen among the tall laurel-bushes where Honor's guilty father lay slowly struggling back to life.

"What is it, John? Do speak—I'm so frightened. Why must I go with you to see this poor man? I would rather not. You will think me a great coward; but indeed, indeed, unless I can do him good, I would far rather not go with you."

"But you *may* do him good, Honor," said John, stopping for a moment and looking her steadily in the face. "This is not a matter of choice, my dear, but of duty. God knows I would not willingly bring you face to face with this man, but—listen quietly, Honor—this is no time for nerves and foolishness. I have just heard, pet, that he is—your father, Honor, and—"

"My father!" she said with a gasp, "and he is dying! And you said it was you that killed him! O, John!"

They were the only words she uttered, but the sting of their reproach smote the heart of the unhappy husband, as, with Honor's arm still

linked in his, the two, quite mutely now, hastened their steps over the closely-shaven turf.

At last—the way had seemed very long, though in fact it was not more than three hundred yards in length—they reached their goal. Terribly still and silent—a silence that could be felt—the place seemed to both, as, parting the light sprays of the branching evergreens, John Beacham opened the way for his pale wife to enter on the dismal scene. To his infinite relief, he perceived that his late antagonist had raised himself on his elbow, and though fearfully pale and wan, gave evident tokens of still belonging to the land of the living. John, leading the trembling Honor by the hand, drew her forward to his side.

“You have sworn to me that she is your child,” he said solemnly, “and may God forgive you if you have told an honest man a lie!”

Shuddering from head to foot, and utterly bewildered by such a rapid succession of emotions, Honor could only sink upon her knees, and press silently the delicate white hand of him whom she had so lately been taught to regard as her parent.

A sickly smile flitted over the Colonel’s face, and he made a feeble effort to speak.

“Say nothing; *I* shall say nothing,” was all that John, who listened with eagerness unutter-

able for more, could distinctly catch. Honor, seated on the turf behind him, lay the pale expressive head of her dying father on her breast. Quite still and motionless he rested there, apparently unconscious; but what man of mortal birth could divine the thoughts which might be dimly floating through that deadened and bewildered brain? It might be that visions of the long-ago past—the past when he was young and innocent, and repeating his simple prayer beside his mother's knee—came back to him in that dismal hour; or, more likely still, was it that the white ghastly face of the girl whom he had *murdered*—not directly, it is true, for he had never lifted a hand against her life, but whom he had as surely slain as though he had “drugged her posset,” or fired a bullet through her brain—was it that the livid face of Winifred Moriarty came back to him from the silent grave, and filled his soul with the dark and nameless terrors of remorse?

“He is not dead; his heart beats!” John said in a hoarse whisper, as he stood near in speechless misery; but Honor only shook her head, and the time seemed terribly long to both before the sound of hushed voices and of rapidly-advancing footsteps gave token that help was at last at hand. In a few more moments, Dr. Kempshall, followed closely by the crowd, which on similar occasions never *will*

consent to remain in the background, was examining the awkward wound, the tidings of which had spread consternation through the length and breadth of the well-filled grounds of Danescourt.

CHAPTER VII.

WAS HONOR GLAD OR SORRY?

DRAWING his wife's arm gently within his own, John led her away from the spot where the surgeon was examining the condition of the injured man.

"I shall be within call if I am required," he said; and Honor, understanding his meaning, trembled from head to foot. She longed yet dreaded to ask her husband what had passed between him and her father. Her father! The bond was such a sacred one that she could not but cling in thought, not only with love but reverence, to the being who bore that relation towards her. Instinctively, too, but grievously, did she blame herself for ingratitude towards John; for Honor turned with something like repulsion from the good and trusted friend on whose arm she leant, and who was saying, as they came uppermost, unstudied words of comfort, while his own heart was full to overflowing of anxiety and sorrow.

"It's a bad business, my dear," he said; "and I don't see that you can do any good here. It would be better, it seems to me, if you and mother were to go in the trap to Gawthorpe. It would be more comfortable for you to be out of this crowd; and when anything is known, and—settled, I could come after, and let you know."

Honor was silent. She was thinking that it would be hard to return home in such suspense about her father, thinking that it was not for John, who had been the cause of all her sorrow, to send her away at such a time as this.

"Well, what are you fretting about, Honey?" John asked, stopping short and looking earnestly into her pale face. "Is there anything you wish—anything that I can do?"

"I was feeling," Honor said in a tone so low that he could hardly catch the words, "that I should like—if you don't—object—to remain where my father is; to remain at least till we know what the doctor says about his wound."

"As you like, my dear," John answered quietly; but there was bitterness in his heart as the idea crossed his mind that Honor at that moment was thinking more of her newly-found parent than of him; "as you like: we will find mother; my head's growing stupid, I think, with all this bother; and, Honor"—after a pause, and drawing a long breath

—“I think it’s best, if anything should happen, though I begin to think it ain’t likely, to—to your father—I think it’s best, my dear, to tell you that I didn’t strike him unprovoked. The Colonel—it’s an ugly story, and one that I hardly know how to tell you—boasted, he did, and talked big; and—but I suppose it ain’t altogether right to go on this way to you about him: this I must say, though, that I couldn’t stand the heartless, horrible things he said about—about a poor unhappy girl, who—Honor!” stopping short in his walk, and grasping both her hands with a force that was almost painful—“Honor, can’t you understand? I wouldn’t hurt your feelings, pet—no, not for the world—but—”

“But you do, John,” sobbed Honor, who was growing hysterical, and whose small unpractised head was becoming bewildered by the force of contending emotions. “You do—you frighten me—I—”

“My poor darling,” John said soothingly, “I know it’s hard. You are such a child to be told such things, too; so young to learn about such wickedness. Not that *she* was wicked; no—no—I’ll not believe it—not if it was proved before a judge and jury—I’d not believe, Honor, that *your* mother—precious—the poor thing who is gone to God so long ago, was a wicked girl!”

They were quite alone—as solitary under the spreading trees, with the high bracken sending up its pungent odour beneath their tread, as if they had been walking between the high banks of the quiet lanes at home. Half in confusion of mind, and half from a desire to screen his wife from observation, John had chosen that pathless cut through a little-frequented portion of the park; and greatly, as in deep pity he witnessed her uncontrollable emotion, did he congratulate himself on the precautions he had taken.

Poor little Honor! Poor foolish, ambitious girl! The mystery that she had so earnestly yearned to fathom was at last cleared up, and she knew—what one less innocent and unworld-taught than herself might long since have surmised—that where there is concealment there is almost certain to be guilt, and that she, alas, was the child of sin and shame! Very bitter, and yet not *all* bitter, were the tears she shed. There was something soothing after all—and in spite of the hard things that John had said of Colonel Norcott, he *was* a gentleman and a man of fashion—there was something soothing in the idea that she was not utterly relationless, not completely a lone waif, cast on the waters of life fatherless and forlorn. Her poor young mother, John had given her to understand, was dead. For *her* there was no

more sorrowing or shame; in the grave she had found rest from her great griefs, so the tears that Honor shed for the parent whom she had never known were pitying rather than regretful ones. On the whole—and in that she did not greatly differ from the generality of those who are young to suffering—Honor was selfish in her sorrow. The few minutes which she had spent, watching in agonised alarm what seemed to her inexperienced eyes the death-pangs of her father, had awakened in her breast feelings of the most powerful filial interest and love. It was not unnatural that so it should have been. Lying there at her feet wan and senseless, the peculiar elegance of his form and figure made conspicuous by the unconscious grace of the attitude into which he had fallen, every trace of ignoble passion removed from the face, which in its calm immobility looked so very like to death, what wonder was it that Honor's heart should have swelled with emotions of tenderness and pity towards the parent so lately found, and found, perhaps, only that she might, under circumstances peculiarly painful, mourn his, to her, irreparable loss?

It was such thoughts as these—thoughts which caused the tears to rush in torrents down her pale cheeks—that filled Honor's breast to overflowing, leaving no room in it for any recollection either of

her husband's mental anxiety or of his probable danger should the blow, which in a moment of ungovernable fury he had dealt her father, prove a fatal one.

Meantime—and while Honor, seated on a fallen tree, was receiving, without, it is to be feared, greatly valuing them, her husband's well-intended consolations—Dr. Kempshall had pronounced his opinion on Colonel Norcott's state, and had superintended that unfortunate gentleman's removal from Danescourt. As a matter of course he had delivered his judgment both with caution and oracularly, refraining even, till such time as the patient could speak for himself, to express any decided opinion regarding the origin of the accident. To Lord Guernsey, who was full of curiosity and interest on the subject, and who questioned him very closely as to whether he thought it probable that an assault had been committed, Dr. Kempshall replied that appearances were decidedly in favour of such a proposition; at the same time, however, there was nothing in the nature of the injury to entirely render nugatory the idea that Colonel Norcott *might* have, unintentionally of course, and through the medium of a fall, cut his head open in the frightful manner which his lordship had just witnessed.

“Frightful indeed!” said Lord Guernsey; “upon my soul and honour, I shall wonder if the man gets over it, and how such an *accident* could have happened is wonderful to me. You think there’s no danger though, do you, doctor, in taking him to the Bell? It isn’t a hundred yards farther than it is to my house, and I own, if it comes to the same thing, I should prefer not having Colonel Norcott laid up at Danescourt. There is his wife, poor woman, to be telegraphed for (Arthur Vavasour says she is at Ryde), and Lady Guernsey hasn’t the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Norcott; and then Mr. Baker—Certainly, doctor, if it can be managed,” continued the good-natured nobleman, “and without the slightest risk—mind that—to the poor fellow himself, I should greatly prefer his being taken to the Bell.”

And to the Bell—a very comfortable, old-fashioned inn, containing many more big bedrooms, double and single, than were ever likely to be required, and an “assembly-room,” of which much varied use was made at all seasons of the year, for public dinners, balls, lectures, itinerant minstrels, and all and every of the various purposes to which such apartments have time out of mind in county towns been put—the Colonel was accordingly taken.

“He will be well cared for with Mrs. Bycroft,” Dr. Kempshall said. He was walking by the side of his patient, for whose transport to the inn at Gawthorpe a litter had been hastily improvised, and some stout men of the labouring class engaged to carry Colonel Norcott the short half-mile to the town. “He will be well cared for, and of course we shall have the Bakers over directly from Westhoe. It will be a shock to the old lady, and she has had her troubles, poor soul, without this coming upon her in her old age.”

He had scarcely ceased speaking when the face, which he had never ceased from carefully watching, began to show signs, in consequence probably of the restoratives administered, of returning colour and intelligence. Moving his head slowly, and with evident pain, a little to one side, Colonel Norcott made a sign with his hand that the bearers should stop; and then Dr. Kempshall, bending closely over him, could just catch the words :

“It was a fall—an accident. Don’t let anyone be bothered;” and having thus, with evident effort, delivered himself, the patient relapsed into insensibility.

CHAPTER VIII.

JOHN WISHES THE PAST UNDONE.

“WELL, mother, and how does she seem now? I wish I could hear that she’d gone to sleep, poor child! If she doesn’t get better soon, I shall call in Dr. Kempshall.”

“Send for Dr. Fiddlestick!” said Mrs. Beacham in a pet. “Now, John, don’t you be foolish. There’s nothing the matter with Honor except airs and foolishness. You just let her alone—there’s nothing like *that* for bringing girls to their senses. Make a fuss with ’em, and they’ll worry your life out with their nonsense.”

John Beacham and his mother were sitting together in the gloaming in one of the small dingy sitting-rooms appertaining to not the most cheerful side of that excellent hostelry known from time immemorial as the Bell Inn, Gawthorpe. Neither mother nor son were in the best possible temper of either mind or spirits. The old lady especially was what may be called, in

vulgar parlance, "upset." The mere circumstance of being disturbed from the delightful monotonous routine of her every-day life would have been alone sufficient to account for the fact of Mrs. Beacham being "put out." But, in addition to this misfortune there was the worry of Colonel Norcott's "accident," an accident the real facts of which had been penitently explained to her by John; and as a climax to all this terrible annoyance (for though she had said little on the subject, Mrs. Beacham had been thrown into a grievously anxious, as well as extremely mortified, state of mind by the fact that John had lost his temper and rendered himself amenable to the law), there was the more than probability that Honor would be giving herself more than ever the airs of a fine lady, and that, too, in Mrs. Beacham's opinion, with some show of right,—so true is it that good blood, even when illegitimately inherited, induces a certain amount of servile respect.

John had found it no easy matter—it never was easy when his mother's understanding had to be appealed to—to make that worthy personage see both sides of the question at issue.

"You see, mother," he said, after having, to the best of his ability, explained what had taken place between himself and his victim,—“you see, mother, it was the man's talk that aggravated me

so. The boastful brutal way that he had with him was enough to provoke a saint. It was bad enough to hear that Honor, poor girl, wasn't an honest woman's child; but when it came to impudence, and from a fellow like that—a man that would cheat his best friend, if he had one, in the matter of a horse—it was more than I could stand. I am sorry now I hit so hard, I'll own to that; but he got no more than he deserved; no, by George!" and John's heavy hand came down with a thump upon the table—"he got no more than he deserved!"

Mrs. Beacham, who was looking, in her company silk and Sunday bonnet, very unlike her normal self, sighed heavily at this new evidence of her son's intemperate spirit.

"Well, well, John," she said, "what's done can't be undone. It's a bad business altogether; a terrible business, *I* call it—bad blood o' both sides, according to you; but we must hope the best. And the first thing to hope for is that the Colonel himself won't die this bout. It would be a shocking thing if he wasn't to get over it; and though *he* said it was an accident—which was honourable, as *I* call it, on *his* side—yet, who knows, there are plenty in the world ready to think the worst, and the truth will out—which there's a Providence over all to find out." This

view of what had occurred as taken and delicately hinted by his depressed parent, did not greatly tend to enliven poor John's spirits. On the whole the unburdening of his heart and conscience had not proved a satisfactory operation. He had not even been able to ascertain—so taken up was the old lady in the minor details to which she had just alluded—whether his mother felt drawn to her daughter-in-law, or the contrary, in consequence of this wholly unexpected discovery. John Beacham had not now to learn that matters had not gone always smoothly between his woman-kind; nor, with all his affection and respect for his parent, had it been difficult to arrive at the conclusion that the crumpled roses had been almost always of the old lady's strewing. He had abstained from any remarks on this unsatisfactory state of things, trusting to time, that (supposed) universal settler of schisms, to set all to rights. Whether that desirable arrangement was likely to be hastened or retarded by the knowledge that in Honor's veins ran the blue blood of the ancient race of Norcotts, remained to be seen.

In the mean time honest John Beacham, the man whose life had hitherto been so uneventful, whose experience of the exciting scenes that to some are as the very breath of life was so wonderfully limited, was about as miserable as it is possible

for a healthy, strong-nerved, unsentimental man to feel. There was a vague sensation (*only* vague, thank God for that!) within him that a wall of separation was being raised between him and the young wife who, for the first time, had interests separate from his. He was a man not prone to the anticipation of misfortune. The fear of having fallen upon evil days was one that he would in his matter-of-fact simplicity have been very far from hugging to his heart, with the morbid clinging of the *tête montée* and the imaginative. But though a sensible man, and a cheerfully disposed, the shadow of a coming change was cast before his path; and John Beacham, leaning his head upon his hand, gazed vacantly into the inn-yard, where busy ostlers and ubiquitous stablemen were fulfilling the noisy, swearing, slopping ends of their several beings, and thought, more gloomily than in his life he had ever done before, upon the future. What, he asked himself, if his mother's boding prophecy should come true? What if Frederick Norcott were indeed to die, and the blood of the man whom he had slain should be required at his hands? That, in case of the Colonel's death and his own inculpation, any extreme or heavy penalty would be inflicted on himself, John was too well versed in the laws and common sense of

the land to think probable; but there was another punishment—a punishment from which neither human laws nor even the sense of a powerful press can avail to save the guilty—and that punishment is the sting, poisonous as an asp's, and more stinging than the cruellest serpent's—the sting, that is, of an accusing conscience. Well did poor John Beacham know that, should Honor's father die of that foul blow that *he* had dealt him, the memory of that day's work would haunt his spirit, both in his waking and his sleeping moments, both in his goings out and his comings in, whilst life should last; while as for *her*—as for the woman in whom his all of happiness here below was centred—if she should turn her bright face from him; if she, looking upon him as her father's murderer, should no more be the light and blessing of his home; if—But the unhappy man could pursue the terrible picture no farther. With a groan, involuntarily uttered in his deep anguish, but which startled his mother from a refreshing nap, John's honest head fell forward in his clasped hands, and tears (the first that he had shed since he was a boy) oozed slowly through his fingers.

CHAPTER IX.

HONOR FINDS A NEW RELATION.

“COME now, take an egg, and don’t be foolish. They’re not like the Paddocks eggs, to be sure, but you may as well taste a bit—or a slice of ham. John, give Honor a slice of ham—terrible stripy it looks, to be sure, but what can you expect when one is that foolish as to go away from home in this sort of nonsensical way?”

Honor, looking very pale, and with her eyes heavy with weeping, was sitting behind the big bronze tea-urn—an article of furniture coeval, doubtless, with the building of the Bell—and with a trembling hand was performing her accustomed duty of making tea for the family. John had good-naturedly offered to take the affair upon himself, but Mrs. Beacham had at once vetoed the idea.

“Such stuff and nonsense!” she said; “as if making tea had ever been known in this world to

do anybody harm! And a man, too, to set about doing such things! No, no. Take my word for it," the energetic old woman went on to say, "there's nothing like having something to do for keeping the spirits up, and you'll see, John, if you don't make a noodle of Honor, she'll be herself again in half the time."

But though the old lady did thus throw cold water on John's simple plans for his wife's comfort, she did nevertheless, in her own way and to a certain extent, feel for the girl, whose only relation (and Mrs. Beacham entertained very strong old-fashioned prejudices on the score of consanguinity) was in such deadly peril, and that through her own husband's hands. If John had not been so *very* tender over Honor, her mother-in-law would have almost felt inclined, so piteous was the sight of her delicate white face, to, in her fashion, pet and sympathise with the "poor thing," reminding her that "misfortunes will happen;" that "we are none of us, if we did but know it, more to be pitied than our neighbours;" that it would "all be the same a hundred years hence;" and, in short, recalling to the sufferer's recollection all the various and stereotyped phrases of consolation which well-intentioned people are apt to din into the unwilling ears of the afflicted.

"You will try an egg, my dear" (the use of

this term of endearment was going great lengths for Mrs. Beacham), "and endeavour to make the best of things. It's a sad thing, as I have known myself, to lose a father; but a father"—and here the excellent woman filled her mouth with the much-vituperated ham—"a father that one has never seen but once ain't the same thing, in my opinion, as a father that has been a father, and has done his duty by one as a father should."

"But, mother," interposed John, "there is no use in telling Honor that."

"Tut, tut, my dear, you just let me speak. You're not more fit to manage a wife than you are a baby, but it's never too late to learn; and if you'll take my advice, you'll just order the chaise-cart directly breakfast's over (such a breakfast as it is too! but I'll warrant, such as it is, they'll make us pay dear enough for it); and then, stopping for nothing and nobody, we'll drive back to the Paddocks."

John shook his head at this wise proposal. "You can go back yourself, mother, and I think, too, that you'd better take Honor along with you; but it won't do for me to be out of the way, even if I could bear myself (which to own the truth I could not) to be out of the way of hearing about the Colonel."

Honor, on hearing John's proposal, looked at

him imploringly over the Britannia-metal teapot. To her also it would be a sore aggravation to leave the place where her father lay between life and death. That his days *were* endangered, Dr. Kempshall had now openly said. The blow he had received was a very severe one, and there had been considerable injury to the bone, but the immediate cause for apprehension lay in the inflammatory condition of the patient's blood. The weather was intensely hot, and Colonel Norcott had been indulging, though not to excess, yet a little more freely than was advisable under the circumstances, in the good things provided for the company in the gentlemen's tent, where Mr. Arthur Vavasour's health had been drunk with a good deal of enthusiasm by his numerous friends. On the majority, whose heads had *not* been subsequently broken, the trifling excess had produced no unpleasant consequences. But Colonel Norcott was unfortunately the exception to the rule; his blood had been terribly heated; and inflammation of the brain, and even erysipelas, might too probably be the result of his indiscretion.

"Don't say that I am to go, John, please," said Honor, the ready tears springing to her eyes, and in a voice that went straight to John's heart. His mother, however, was inexorable.

"Now, Honor, I won't have you foolish. If

John is to stay, which I must own I think a great piece of extravagance and folly, there's no reason why you should remain, to be a trouble and an expense to him. And, John, the more I think of it, the more I can't understand what risks you are likely to run in the matter. You were quite alone, you two, you say, and after what Colonel Norcott said—"

"Mother," broke in John a little impatiently, "what *he* said, poor fellow, has nothing, or next to nothing, to do with it. If the worst comes to the worst," he added in a lower tone, and very gravely, "I shall be questioned; and then I shall, as a matter of course, tell the whole truth from beginning to end."

For the first time, on hearing this expression of her husband's resolution, the idea of danger to him flashed across her mind; and with it a sudden pang of self-reproach curdled her blood painfully. Rising from her chair, she laid her hand gently on his shoulder. She knew, *felt* also, how good and true he was, and at that moment he seemed of more value to her than a hundred fathers.

"O, John," she said, "*dear* John! they couldn't hurt you for it! That would be worse than everything;" and overcome by vague visions of imprisonment, transportation, and even (for she was very young and ignorant) of death, she burst

into a passion of tears, and lay with her fair head on John's broad breast, sobbing like a child.

He soothed her as best he could, stroking her glossy golden hair with a touch tender as a woman's. There was little to fear for him, he said; there was no malice on his part, no intention, that would be easily proved, to kill. At the worst it would be "manslaughter," and, he thought, probably *no* punishment. No punishment—ah, poor John!—save that of the gnawing worm within which never dies, and the torturing fire that not rivers of remorseful tears can quench!

But for all John's love and pity for Honor, and both were very great, he could not be brought to say that it was in any respect advisable that Honor should remain at Gawthorpe. The telegraph, he argued, both could and should bring her constant intelligence of Colonel Norcott's condition, and in the mean time *she* (a point on which John was more anxious than he allowed to appear) would be secure from public observation, and from the remarks, ill-natured or otherwise, of the curious. The idea that his wife's close relationship to the man lying in danger of death so very near to them might by some possibility transpire was very painful to the former. In that relationship he saw nothing but disgrace both to Honor and to himself, and he was, therefore,

almost morbidly desirous of removing her from the spot where at any moment observation might be turned towards her, and she might be spoken of, *ex hypothesi* at least, if not openly and decidedly, as the illegitimate daughter of a gambler and a reprobate.

That there were reasons which John could not well bring to bear on his wife's powers of comprehension, the reader will readily understand. Setting aside the fact that *he* was not the man to throw a stone at his prostrate enemy, there was the wholesome old-fashioned faith in the divine right of parents to be set aside; a faith in which John Beacham, and his fathers before him, had been born and bred. Disowned and deserted—unrecognised as well by the laws of the land as by the man to whom she owed her birth, owing *him* nothing save the inheritance of shame—John would yet have shrunk, now that excitement had subsided and his blood was cooled, from saying aught to Honor that could lessen either her respect or her newly-born affection for her father.

"It's only natural, my dear," he said, "that you should be uneasy; and it isn't for me to say 'do this,' or 'don't do it.' Hush, mother, please; it's a trying time for Honor, and—"

But before he could descant further—either on the nature of, or the palliations for, his young

wife's trials—a loud tap was heard at the door, a tap which was immediately followed up by the intrusion of a waiter's head, the said waiter being the bearer, as speedily became apparent, of a note.

“From Mrs. Baker, sir,” the man said, presenting it to Mr. Beacham on a japanned waiter, “and the favour of an answer is requested.”

It was a small unportentious-looking missive, directed in an uncertain feminine hand. Yet John opened it with strong forebodings of evil, forebodings which were to a certain extent justified, since the writer—one of the gentlest and most charitable, by the way, of Christian matrons—imparted to him, in a few agitated lines, the fact that her son, believing himself to be lying on his bed of death, had disclosed to her one of the heaviest of his past offences against his God, and had declared himself to be the penitent father of John Beacham's wife.

“The most earnest wish of my poor guilty son,” wrote the unhappy mother, “appears to be that he may see again the child whom he has so long neglected and forsaken. May God forgive me if I am doing wrong in urging you to grant this prayer. At the eleventh hour there was forgiveness for even one of the worst of sinners. May I not hope that, as a sign and hope of that forgiveness, *you* may be led to grant the prayer

not only of my son, but of one whom the judgments of God have followed all the days of her life."

John laid down the letter with something very like despair tugging at his heartstrings. The worst that he had, as regarded Honor, ventured to anticipate, had come to pass. To refuse the entreaty of the aged lady, so soon perhaps, by his act and deed, to be bereaved of her only son, was simply impossible, but that prayer granted, and Honor permitted to take her place by her father's dying pillow, all hope of concealing the terrible secret—which John would have willingly given all that he possessed to hide—was at an end.

With a heavy heart he made the contents of the missive known to his womankind.

"You see, Honey," he said, as his wife's eyes glanced, almost without taking in their sense, over the hurriedly-written lines, "you see, Honey, we might have saved ourselves all this bother. Here's Mrs. Baker, poor soul, knows all about it, and wants to see you, child. It isn't what I should have wished; but what is to be must be; and so I suppose I must just send word that you'll wait on Mrs. Baker in the room she has to sit in. Ah me, it's a great change! And who'd a thought, when we left home only so late as yesterday, that such things would come about!"

The revolution that was taking place seemed

indeed a startling one to that quiet stay-at-home family. To Honor, now that her vague wishes seemed on the point of being gratified, now that she was *not* to return to her tranquil home at the Paddocks, but, instead, was to be suddenly thrown into the presence and society of strangers, the variety in her life did not appear in quite so attractive a light as she had anticipated. She knew nothing whatever of Mrs. Baker; nothing, that is to say, beyond the fact that she was old, religious, and a lady; none of which qualities tended, it must be confessed, to render the prospect of the approaching, and now not to be evaded, meeting particularly agreeable in Honor's sight. To make matters worse, Mrs. Beacham—her short-lived compassion for her daughter-in-law being brought to a sudden conclusion—took it into her head to be more than usually jealous and hard to manage on the occasion. Now that Honor was about to be "taken up," as the cantankerous old lady phrased it, "by the grandees," all the milk of human kindness in Mrs. Beacham's breast seemed turned to gall; and very short and snappish were the only replies that either her son or Honor could extract from her.

"Well, mother," John said, with a poor attempt at sportiveness, "here we are together again!" He had just returned from leaving his

agitated wife at the door of Mrs. Baker's sitting-room; and—it was morbid, foolish, perhaps, on his part—he could not wholly divest himself of a very miserable, but quite undefinable, sensation that the curtain had fallen on the first act of his married life, and that the happiest portion of it was at an end for ever.

Leaving him to bear as best he could both his own sorrowful reflections and the perpetual nagging of the old lady, one of whose weaknesses it was never to endure patiently what she in her jealous susceptibility denominated being “képt out” of what was going on, we will follow Honor to her interview with Colonel Norcott's long-suffering mother. Mrs. Baker was one of those women—and they are not a few—who seem from their earliest girlhood marked out for suffering. Her home-life—owing to circumstances needless here to mention—had been so wearying and unendurable, that she had at eighteen married a man for whom she entertained no stronger feeling than an absence of dislike. Mr. Norcott, who, as we already know, was a country squire of good estate, had endeared himself to her by his sterling qualities, and by his unfailing affection for herself. During his lifetime they were, however, rendered for many years unhappy by the illness and deaths of five children successively

born to them. In early infancy the little Norcotts were much, as other beings of their age, subject to occasional illnesses, but not apparently deficient in vigour and stamina. To what the mysterious ailment was owing that, one after the other, as they attained the age of twelve or thereabouts, cut off those till then seemingly healthy children, and condemned them to an early tomb, the doctors found it hard to say. It had been very hard to see them die; very, very grievous to watch the fading of the healthy colour, the weakening of the vigorous limbs, the slow and stealthy, but too sure, advance of death. As each of her beloved ones was removed from the little place that it had filled on earth to a happier home above, Mrs. Norcott—weeping as one that would not be comforted—had complained in bitterness of spirit that there was no sorrow like unto her sorrow, and that the burden that had been laid upon her was greater than she could bear. And yet she lived through it—lived through it to the wonder of those who, not having so suffered, are ignorant how much the human heart can endure, and yet exist—lived also to confess, in the solitude of her own chamber, where no eye but God's could look into her heart, that death was not the bitterest of mortal woes; for that a wounded spirit—a spirit crushed by a sense of shame, and

bowed down by the burden of a loved one's sin—is of all earthly evils the most difficult of endurance.

Mrs. Norcott had been five years a widow, and her only surviving child was eighteen when she decided — chiefly that he might have the advantage of a stepfather's counsel and control—to marry again. The step, unfortunately, did not prove a successful one. Frederick Norcott from the first “set himself,” as the nurses say, against his medicine; and Mr. Baker—a sensible, unassuming, but quietly proud man—did not persevere in the up-hill work imposed upon him. Happily Mrs. Baker's jointure, with the addition of the small but comfortable patrimony, on the strength of which the retired solicitor had ventured on aspiring to the hand of the still handsome Mrs. Norcott, were safe from the all-devouring maw of her reckless and selfish son. To what extent he had in secret, and without even the knowledge of her less-easy-to-be-persuaded husband, mulcted the anxious woman of her little-prized gold, no one but the greedy spendthrift and his unselfish parent could have told. For years, whether at home or abroad, in the army or out of it, in youth and in middle-age, this only son of one of the best of women had never ceased being to her a source of trouble and of trial. Her most peaceful days concerning him had been those which

had elapsed since his marriage, since for more than twelve months there had been no call upon her purse, no appeal to her motherly sympathy for distresses which she had at last begun to believe were frequently fictitious. On Fred's return to England, which event occurred about a year before his introduction to the reader, Mrs. Baker had made, with some satisfaction, the acquaintance of her son's wife. The colonial so-called heiress, was a *fade*, sentimental, well-meaning woman; very much inclined to worship the husband who in birth and breeding was so greatly her superior, and little disposed to regret the loss through advancing years of such small claims to beauty as nature had endowed her with.

Colonel Norcott's first visit (since his return) to his stepfather's house had not been hailed with much satisfaction by that gentleman. Mr. Baker's habits, despite his twenty-seven years or so of married life, were decidedly those of an old bachelor; his hours for meals and family prayers, his times for rising up and lying down, were fixed and immutable; and the erratic proceedings of his stepson, though they were not allowed to actually interfere with those arrangements, did decidedly prevent their being carried through with that staid decorum which was so precious in the sight of the *ci-devant* solicitor. The principles too, or rather

the lack of principles, evidenced by the gallant Colonel were very obnoxious to Mr. Baker. He was a man utterly without toleration for the weaknesses of others; and, the power of self-command being inherent in his own nature, he could not understand that power being either impossible or even difficult of attainment in others. To do right was so entirely his intention, that he was misled by that very sincerity of desire into the belief that he *was* doing right. His leanings were also so completely towards the proper behaved and virtuous, that, while he would have been a pattern stepfather to a prudent, sensible young man, "who needed no repentance," he turned with feelings of absolute dislike and repulsion from the sinner whom a more forbearing, or rather a more judiciously controlling, course of conduct might possibly have assisted in turning from the error of his ways.

The intelligence that Colonel Norcott had met with an accident that would probably end fatally flew on the wings of rumour to Lingfield Cottage, preceding by half an hour, at the least, the judicious message sent by kind-hearted Lady Guernsey to the mother of the injured man. Mrs. Baker, notwithstanding her many trials, was still for her age, which was under seventy, an active and a healthy woman. *Habit* had likewise, to a certain

degree, hardened her to suffering; and moreover, that unlucky Fred—who, as a pretty blue-eyed boy, used to keep “her heart in her mouth,” to use a simple mother’s phrase, with his daring tricks and perilous escapades—was probably not quite so dear to her, when a hardened, battered *roué* of forty-five, as he had been in his days of comparative, but still highly troublesome, innocence.

There was of course no choice, as even Mr. Baker was obliged to allow, but to go at once to Gawthorpe. It was intensely annoying, and that he *was* seriously displeased was made manifest by Mr. Baker, after the fashion of gentlemen of his stamp and principles. It was an opportunity, however, to make his light—the light of a self-denying, right-minded, God-fearing man—shine before the world; the world, that is, of his well-ordered home; the home where Godfrey Baker, Esq., whilom of New-square, Lincoln’s-Inn, and now churchwarden of the parish of Bigglesworth, and one of its most respected and influential inhabitants, reigned in calm and undisputed authority.

“A most unpleasant and troublesome affair indeed,” remarked Mr. Baker, as, with his sorrowing wife seated beside him in their little pony-carriage, he drove with an air of especial dignity through the well-painted iron gates that guarded

his trim, citizen, box-like "front garden" from the incursions of the profane.

"A most unpleasant and troublesome affair, but one for which I cannot say that *I* at least was not prepared. A disreputable life is very likely—ve-ry likely, indeed—as I have often noticed, to end in a violent death, and—"

"But, Mr. Baker," began the unhappy mother, whose affection for her only child no amount of misconduct on his part had ever been able to succeed in effectually alienating; "but, Mr. Baker, there is no reason yet, thank God! to imagine that anything—anything dreadful—has happened to Frederick. Lady Guernsey mentioned an accident—a fall—an injury to the head; but nothing serious, at least nothing to make one fear that—"

"One should always fear the worst, my dear Mary, when the person so situated has led the life, and tempted Providence to the extent, that Colonel Norcott has. I do not wish to be severe, and, above all, I do not desire at such a time to aggravate your sufferings; but Frederick Norcott has—as we all unfortunately know—been a thoroughly bad man. God grant that, even at the eleventh hour, he may be brought to a sense of his misconduct, and may repent, before it is too late, of his many and grievous sins!"

He whipped the pony up vigorously after this conventional prayer; suggestive strokes they were, as though to imply that, according to *his* belief, a good and efficient scourging would be aptly bestowed on the recreant body of his guilty son-in-law. Mrs. Baker, to whom prayers for her erring son — heartfelt and sincere — had been familiar from the hour when the reprobate Fred first began to break the laws both of God and man, sat very still and silent by the side of her respected helpmate. She had nothing — could have nothing — to say for Fred; and, moreover, her spirit was terribly sore and sad within her at the thought of his sickness and his danger. Sickness to which he was so unused; danger which he was so ill-prepared to meet.

At last — the way seemed a long one, and the pony, always slow and measured in his movements, appeared more than usually addicted to his besetting sin of taking his own time upon the road — at last the houses of Gawthorpe came in sight, the High-street was gained, and the Bell Inn, a flat-faced red-bricked building of imposing dimensions, rose up before the elderly pair of anxious and troubled visitors, in all the busy dulness of a county town's best inn.

It was long past eight o'clock — a soft sweet summer's evening — the daylight fading gradually

away, and the sounds of active life dying on the ear as the solemn shades of night crept slowly onward. There were but few persons in the street, or crowding (as they had done an hour before) round the entrance of the hotel. For the present, at least, there seemed nothing new to learn concerning the great and absorbing topic of the day—namely, the mysterious “accident” which had happened to Colonel Frederick Norcott. The public—that very curious as well as impertinent many-headed monster—had already begun to put forth certain likely as well as unlikely surmises on the occasion; and in those surmises, had not the owner of Updown Paddocks been the respected John Beacham that he was, he would probably have played a somewhat conspicuous part. There were not a few (their remarks, however, as not likely to be received in good part, were made *sotto voce*) who considered it as a suggestive circumstance that Mr. John Beacham, though the first to give the alarm, had never either to man, woman or child—so far at least as was generally known—mentioned any particulars of the accident; or, which was still more remarkable, seeing that the said John was very far from being of an uncommunicative temperament, had he given utterance to any surmises, any suggestive hints, which might have guided

the gossip-lovers to a discovery of the truth. For a long period—a period lengthened into hours through the undisguised curiosity of the neighbourhood—the avenues to the hotel were thronged with persons desirous of learning something “authentic” before their return to the quiet of their respective homes. That there did remain behind something more to learn, everyone seemed instinctively to feel; and the few persevering ones that still lingered round the hotel-doors would probably have felt amply rewarded for their pains could they have stood behind the dingy curtain of the big inn-bed, and overheard a long and whispered converse which the object of their curiosity, pale, excited, and contrary to the orders of Dr. Kempshall, held soon after her arrival with his distressed and agitated mother. In that interview—moved thereto chiefly by an unaccountable desire (the offspring, probably, of a fevered imagination) to see by his bedside the daughter of one whom for a brief season he had passionately loved—Frederick Norcott revealed to his long-enduring parent the sad episode of his life, which, by so exciting the wrath of John Beacham of Updown Paddocks, had led to the calamitous blow from the effects of which he (the delinquent) was now suffering. How far

the guilty man was justified in believing that his mother's tender charity to sinners—a charity born of Christian humility—would cause her to view not only his fault, but the innocent victim of another's sin, with eyes of compassion rather than those of severity and wrath, the following chapter will tend to make apparent.

CHAPTER X.

A GRANDMOTHER'S LOVE.

"DON'T be frightened, my dear; don't tremble so. You are with a friend, remember that; and with a relation too. Why, child," and the eyes of the still warm-hearted woman brimmed over with the gladdest tears that she had known for years, "you are my grandchild!—my own, my only granddaughter! God bless you, my poor child; and may you be the joy and pride, instead of the grief and shame, of those who love you!"

Honor was sitting by her newly-found relation (the relation in love though not in law, who had so generously opened to her her arms and heart) on an old black horse-hair sofa, in a little sitting-room adjoining the bed-chamber occupied by Colonel Norcott. The old lady—already predisposed to like and admire her—had been greatly struck, not only with the rare beauty, but with a certain shy and shrinking grace characteristic of her son's child. The touch of Honor's small

trembling hand, and the kiss of her fresh girlish lips, had warmed Mrs. Baker's heart to her at once. Yearningly, and for a long while prayerfully, had she longed for a child who would, all the days of her life, be unto her as a daughter. Her only child had never, from the days of his boyhood, been as a son to this poor loving mother, who, chancing to be one of the most weak and clinging of the daughters of Eve, could not be content with such poor sympathy as the eminently trustworthy but somewhat stern ex-lawyer was able to bestow.

"You will come and see my son, Honor? Honor! what a pretty name!" and she stroked fondly the delicate fingers that lay within her own dry and wrinkled palm. "He has had a bad night and is very feverish. Dr. Kempshall says that he must be allowed to have his way, and—"

"Did he tell you *everything*, ma'am?" interrupted Honor; "everything about—about—" and she hesitated painfully—"about my husband?"

Mrs. Baker both looked and felt distressed. John Beacham, whom she knew well by repute, and partly, indeed, personally, was the one stumbling-block, the single, but very discouraging hitch, in the new view of things which had been opened out to her sight. Not—let me be thoroughly

understood—that this excellent matron looked with indulgent eyes upon her prodigal's offence ; but the deed being done and ineffaceable, she trusted, seeing that a tardy repentance had followed on the crime, that a merciful forgiveness might be awarded to the penitent, and that Honor would perhaps—But here the thought of John Beacham, his rights, and prejudices, and claims, obtruded themselves, and checked the hopeful projects that were rising up in her mind concerning her so-lately-discovered relative.

“Did he—*did* my father say anything about John?” Honor asked again imploringly. She had more than reciprocated Mrs. Baker's sudden predilection, and the idea that more than probably, supposing that lady to be ignorant of Mr. Beacham's intemperance, she would withdraw her countenance from herself, was terribly alarming. The pleasantest peculiarities which Honor had as yet discovered in her father's mother lay in her extreme gentleness of manner, and the exceeding softness of her voice. There was a refinement, too, in her manner and actions, which was delightful to the foolish creature whose ambition not only to be that mystical thing we call a lady, but to be able to choose her associates from amongst the high-placed of the earth, had become, since her acquaintance with Arthur

Vavasour, almost a mania. Noticing her anxiety, Mrs. Baker hastened, in the kindest imaginable fashion, to relieve it.

“My son,” she said with touching naïveté and simplicity, “has no secrets from his mother now. His confession, poor fellow, has been a painful one ; but he has not now to learn that I—knowing myself to be a sinner, and being humbly conscious of having fallen far short of the mercy of God—do not dare to be severe and cruel upon those who have also need of pardon from on high. It is wrong, dear child, we must acknowledge that, to lift the hand in anger against our fellow-creatures ; but”—smoothing Honor’s golden hair tenderly—“Frederick does not deny that he gave your husband provocation. It was a blow, too, of course—a heavy shock—to learn that his young wife, his—but we will not revert to the painful past, my love. If—if my poor son’s life is mercifully spared to us, we must try and make your excellent husband think better of us all ; while as for you, my dear, it will not be hard, I hope, for you to give us a *little* of your love. You will be very dear to me, Honor—”

She was interrupted by the sweetest and most welcome answer that the girl for whose affection she was yearning could have made to her ; for a pair of loving arms were suddenly thrown

around her aged neck, and Honor, in a passion of grateful tears, exclaimed:

“How good you are to me! I shall love you very dearly — better than anybody; and if my father lives, I think I shall be happier, far happier, than I have ever been before.”

Mrs. Baker was too much engrossed with anxiety for her son's health, and with the thought of his approaching interview with Honor, to take much notice of the latter's slightly incongruous speech; incongruous, as proceeding from the lips of a bride little more than three months old, and whose apparent prospects in life were all that was bright and encouraging. If, however, the idea struck her that there was perchance a skeleton in the young wife's closet, and that all things with her were not what they seemed, the prudent old lady forbore making any inquiry, direct or indirect, into the causes not only of Mrs. John Beacham's burst of grateful sentiment, but of the implied doubt thrown by that impulsive effusion upon the happiness of her home. The time, too, which Mrs. Baker had allowed herself for this trying conversation had more than expired; so, after a long and silent embrace, the two women rose, and without further preparation on either side walked slowly together—arm linked in arm, and one, the younger, feeling very ner-

vous, and not a little bewildered by her novel position—into Colonel Norcott's room.

Honor was not much accustomed to the sight of serious illness, so that the first glimpse which she caught of her father's face—disfigured as it was by the blotches of fever, and surmounted by a linen bandage—filled her with dismay. He was moaning wearily, and evidently wandering in his mind. No revelations of tangible meaning flowed, (and experience tells us that such secrets seldom are divulged by the delirious) from the parched lips of Frederick Norcott. He was (in spirit) miles upon miles, and years upon years, away from that silent bedroom where two women, one old and the other young, watched him with anxious care. Away to the haunts of his giddy desperate youth—away to the scenes in which his living had been devoured—away to the distant lands where, till the wheel of Fortune turned for him, he was well-nigh compelled to fill (figuratively speaking, of course) his belly with the husks which the swine did eat.

For two hours and upwards he lay there tossing restlessly from side to side, muttering incoherent sentences, and causing Honor more than once as she bathed his fevered forehead, or held the cooling medicine to his lips, to blush crimson for the only half-comprehended vileness of her

perhaps dying parent. At the end of those two hours a message—very softly delivered—came to Honor, with a request from her husband to know what she was going to do. Would Mrs. John Beacham come out into the passage and speak to him? John asked; and thus entreated, Honor stole out on tiptoe to meet the kind-hearted man who had in his feverish anxiety almost counted the moments of her absence from his side.

CHAPTER XI.

HONOR SHOWS A LIKING FOR THE "BELL."

TEN days—long and anxious ones—have elapsed since Honor's instalment by her father's bed (for, as may already have been surmised, old Mrs. Beacham and later John himself had been constrained, much against their respective wills, to return to the Paddocks without her), and Colonel Norcott, pronounced out of danger by Dr. Kempshall, has already partially recovered his normal tone of mind. By that time the mystery of Honor's birth had ceased to exist, and all the little world of Gawthorpe, including the equally important and more extended one of Switcham and the surrounding farms, knew her for what she was—namely, the illegitimate daughter of Colonel Frederick Norcott, formerly of West Lowe Court, Sandyshire. Very little—*nothing*, it may almost be said—was ever addressed to John Beacham on the subject of his wife's parentage. Of comparatively

humble birth though they were, an instinctive delicacy warned the major part of his friends, that to John any allusion to the subject would be distasteful at least, if not positively offensive. The undefined suspicion also—strengthened by the fact that, during all the days spent in attendance on her father, John never was known to enter even for a single moment Colonel Norcott's sick room—that he, John Beacham, was no stranger to the accident from which the gallant Fred was suffering, did not tend to render the shrewd Sandyshire yeomen particularly desirous of probing any hidden mental wounds which he might be desirous of concealing.

But in addition to all these causes for silence, there was a change—a trifling one, perhaps, and an alteration more to be felt than explained—in John himself. That he should have been pre-occupied and taciturn whilst his wife's father was lying between life and death was easily to be understood; but the dread of a fatal result was over now, and yet John's brow was moody, and his laugh was heard far less frequently, was likewise far less hearty than of yore. The truth was that John Beacham, loving his wife with an entire and all-absorbing devotion, was repining, not only at her absence, but at the changes which, with the clear-sightedness of jealous affection, he foresaw

would take place in his relations with Honor. Other feelings too, connected with his recent act, were perplexing, and rendering him ashamed. In proportion as his deadly fear of being a self-condemned murderer diminished, so did his softened feelings towards his late antagonist subside likewise. With the conviction that Colonel Norcott was no longer a sufferer from that burst of passion at first so truly repented of, there returned with redoubled force John's antipathy to the man whom he rightly believed to be dead to every feeling of honour, every elevating sentiment of justice or of pity. From the moment when Colonel Norcott was pronounced out of danger, he had endeavoured, without exactly expressing his desire in words, to make Honor understand his wish that she should return to the Paddocks.

"It's lonely without you, my dear," he said more than once, standing with Honor in the summer twilight among the hollyhocks and scarlet-runners, in the old-fashioned inn-garden. "It's very lonely, especially in the evenings; you know I'm not much of a reader, and I get very tired of the old lady's knitting-needles — click, click, click! by the hour together. O, Honor, it will be very pleasant, dear, when you come home again!"

And Honor thought so too; at least, she com-

forted John by saying something of the kind, sending that honest farmer home with a lightened heart because of the awakened hope within him that very soon his wife would be again under the shelter of his roof.

"She'll be here to-morrow, mother, or at farthest next day," he said cheerily to the old lady on his return home, after the ninth day of Honor's absence. "The Colonel is going on all right, thank God! Ah, mother, if you only knew what a relief that is! I never speak to Honor about what passed. I couldn't well, seeing that he's her father, worse luck! But I can tell you that I never slept—no, not a wink, that I can safely say—till he was out of danger; and what would have become of me, if so be he'd died, the Lord in heaven only knows!"

Mrs. Beacham laid down her knitting-needles, and looked at her son with eyes full of loving pity. Her nature seemed to have undergone a change since the eventful day of the Danescourt discovery. The mere fact of being once more alone as of yore, with John, had a softening effect, not only on her feelings towards him, but towards Honor. Her manner of speaking, therefore, towards her daughter-in-law was far more pleasant and tolerant than usual.

"It's been a sore trial, John, I'm sure of that,"

she said; "but Honor won't be the one, I'm sure, not to forget and forgive."

"Forget and forgive!" John repeated warmly. "Why, in Heaven's name, what or who has she got, I should like to know, to forget and to forgive? Is it the man who behaved like a brute and a scoundrel to the poor soul her mother, or is it me, that gave him only what he deserved, the villain, that Honor's to be forgetting and forgiving?"

Poor Mrs. Beacham, completely taken aback by this unexpected outburst, could, in the impossibility of excusing herself, only resume her knitting in dignified silence. She had not the remotest idea how she had offended John—John, whom she had never in her life before known to be so cranky. If he could not talk to Honor about the "crack" on the head that he had given her "papa," why, surely, that was as much as to say she had a right to be offended. So argued to herself this sensible old lady; nor were her reasonings, all things considered, entirely without their modicum of common sense.

Meanwhile, Honor herself, as we have just hinted, was by no means fretting after a return to the Paddocks. She had been made a great deal of during her absence; and Honor was a young lady to whom the process of being made

much of was especially agreeable. Perhaps the one of her new connections by whom she had been the most petted was (and the circumstance is very characteristic of the woman's character) Colonel Norcott's colonial wife. It was through Mrs. Baker's advice that the person who was, next to herself, the most deeply interested in the Colonel's recovery, was, without loss of time, telegraphed to of his danger. Honor, who, as the reader may already have perceived, was not remarkable for moral courage, betrayed some faint symptoms of alarm at the measure. Her grandmother, however (Mrs. Baker always insisted upon her rights of relationship, and *would* be called grandmamma, however much shy Honor endeavoured to escape the duty), her grandmother strove as best she might to steady Mrs. John's nerves on the occasion.

"You will find my son's wife one of the best and unpretending of women; but that, my dear, has nothing to do with the question. If she were the least good-natured and the worst of human beings, our duty would remain the same, and that duty would be to have no secrets from Mrs. Norcott. Even if Fred were certain to recover, I should still repeat the same. Let everything be above-board and open. I don't know whether you understand French. You do? So much the better, for there is a motto in that language

which, to my thinking, should be written in letters of gold on ivory: *Fais ce que dois, avenne que pourra*. And now, my dear, be so good as to ring the bell, and we will despatch the message without loss of time to Mrs. Fred, who is staying with some friends at Ryde. On all accounts, it will be better for her to be here, for Mr. Baker is very uncomfortable at the cottage without me; and you, too, should your father give signs of amendment, which, please God, may be the case, will not be sorry, I am sure, to return to your husband and your home."

To this very natural supposition Honor made no reply, save by a little inward shiver, which was patent only to herself. At that moment, the appalling fact that the home *for life* which she had made for herself was one thoroughly unsuited to her tastes as well as feelings, broke with its fullest force upon John Beacham's wife. She felt—God forgive her for her ingratitude!—that she positively loathed the idea of returning to the companionship of her mother-in-law—to the *mesquin*, wearisome talk of household economies, of the shortcomings of serving-maids, the failure of a "baking," or the "coming in two," in careless Jane's or Sally's hands, of jug or basin. How soon, or if ever, but for *two* adventitious contingencies (the contingencies, namely, of her mother-in-law's

disagreeableness, and the converse as regarded her friend Arthur Vavasour), Honor would have made the discovery that her life was a spoiled and miserable one, it would be hard to say. Not for any imaginable consideration would she have been willing that the dear old lady, whose kindness and gentleness and refinement had so won upon her heart and fancy, should obtain any, even the faintest, inkling of her state of mind. It was bad enough to be discontented, vile enough to wish the past undone, her marriage with that devoted and excellent John a dream of the past, and herself free to love and wed in a sphere more congenial to her tastes—*the* sphere, in short, to which she was in a manner born. All this, I repeat, was odious and wicked enough; and Honor, feeling it to be thus wicked and odious, was naturally desirous of being herself the only confidante of the sad secrets of her untamed and inexperienced heart.

CHAPTER XII.

“THERE’S GOOD, AFTER ALL, IN HER.”

JOHN BEACHAM tried very hard to believe that he rejoiced in his wife’s pleasure in the society of her new connections. Again and again he told himself how well and delightful it was that not only the Bakers, above him in position as they were, but Mrs. Colonel Norcott herself, a personage and an heiress—one, too, who *might* very naturally have looked coldly upon poor Honor—had treated her from the first with a consideration and regard as sincere as they were flattering. John was well aware that the converse of this state of things would have surprised no one; and often, reflecting on the mortification that *might* have been his wife’s portion, he endeavoured to reconcile himself to the deplorable fact that she had been removed, fatally, as he felt, removed, from his sphere into another, and that from being the light and joy of his fireside, Honor had been virtually translated to a world in which *he* had neither part nor interest. That the anxious man was to a certain

degree justified in this suspicion, no judge of character who carefully watched that pretty Honor on her return to what John had, alas! begun to call her duties, could have doubted; for, when she did return, it was not very difficult to perceive that she was not the same Honor who had left the Paddocks only eight short days before. In what the change consisted, however, it would have been difficult to say. She was as willing to oblige, as anxious to please, and as sweet-tempered as before; but there could be traced a languor in her movements, an occasional absence of mind from things present, and a decided want of the *zest*—the spring of life and energy—which, previous to the fatal gala-day, had been conspicuous in the girl’s half Celtic character. All this John, to whom she was far dearer than his own life, noticed with a jealous and ever-growing irritation. With the dangerous faith possessed by many of his sex in their own perceptive powers, this man, so utterly in the dark regarding the complex machinery of a woman’s nature, decided at once that he knew what was the matter with Honor. During that week—that long miserable week—that she had been away from him, her father (how hard it was for John even in thought to call the Colonel by that tender name!) had amused himself, the farmer feared, by initiating

Honor into some of the wicked doings of the bad world in which he lived. Of what should, or indeed *could*, such a man talk, John Beacham said to himself, but of things of which a pure-minded young woman had best know nothing about? What are people the better, he went on to ask himself, for hearing what fashionable people are about in London or in foreign parts? He was no Methodist, not he, and was all for a little pleasure at odd times for everybody; but if Honor were to grow discontented because she couldn't go about like a lady, and have a lodging up in town sometimes, like Mrs. Kempshall, and go to the theatres to learn all sorts of wickedness, why, he and Honor had better come to an understanding. It was an awful threat, certainly, but one which, perhaps unfortunately for Honor, was never carried into execution. I say unfortunately, for at that time a little *stir*, even the commonplace stir of an actual scolding, would have done Honor good. She was suffering from the natural consequences of reaction after an excitement which had told heavily on her nervous system. Now, neither John nor his mother understood anything about nerves. They had heard of such things, to be sure, but they had about as much faith in their actual existence as they had in that of the king of the cannibals, or the great sea-serpent himself.

Had Honor, however, been questioned on the subject of her *malaise*, she would have found it no easy matter to account for her sensations. She felt wearied, listless, and depressed. There was no actual wearying in her mind for change, and yet there was within her a latent conviction that *only* in change would she find comfort and improvement.

How heavily hung at that trying period of this young woman’s life the time that God had given her to improve, she alone could tell. If *they*—her husband and her husband’s mother—would only have talked to her about the late transactions, all might have been better. There are seasons when there is a positive craving after conversation on *self*—a craving which is in itself a token of an unhealthy and morbid condition of mind; and Honor Beacham, seated dejectedly at her work during those long summer evenings—evenings whose silence oppressed her like the lowering of a heavy thunder-cloud—would have been thankful for any discussion that might break the dull monotony of that weary time.

If Honor believed that lack of interest in her concerns was at the bottom of this reserve, she was greatly mistaken. She would, perhaps, have found it hard to imagine that an innate delicacy was the cause of this singular *retenue*; yet so in fact it was. On John Beacham’s side especially, there

existed a very natural shrinking from to any allusion to the past. The blow struck by him in a moment of wild and unpardonable passion was ever present to him as an offence alike against the laws of God and the enactments of man. Had Honor not been, unfortunately, deeply interested in the victim of his ungovernable fury, John would still have felt considerable repugnance to speaking of the man whom he had wounded. But things standing as they were, and, above all, with Honor looking so changed, so quiet, so *grand*, as Mrs. Beacham was once heard to say of her, what wonder that honest John, far from coming to what he called an "understanding" with the wife of his bosom, should, by his hourly-increasing reserve, have opened the gulf between them, which day by day grew wider and more difficult to leap over?

Nor were matters much better as regarded the relations between Mrs. Beacham and her silent daughter-in-law. The old lady, whose heart had begun to warm towards John's well-descended wife, was not well pleased to find that Honor scarcely seemed aware of the change of manner adopted in her favour. Always courteous, but never familiar, Mrs. John Beacham (and the result was scarcely to be wondered at) conveyed the impression that she was proud; and this conviction hardened more than one heart against the suffer-

ing girl. Proud! What was there, in very truth, in her birth to excite sensations of arrogance and self-esteem in even the weakest of human hearts? Could Honor have been able to answer this question as it should have been answered, there would have been a better chance of safety for this poor, ignorant, and ambitious girl. As it was, however, the senseless idea that she was a lady, and the memories of those superior refinements in habits, manners, and *entourage* which (in connection with her father and his belongings) clung around her, were fatal to Honor’s happiness and peace of mind. If she only, in those miserable days, when everyone—when even John himself—seemed estranged from her, could have been blessed with that chiefest of blessings, the blessing of *hope*—hope in the shape of a tenderly longed-for maternity—all might, in spite of the past, have been well with poor little Honor Beacham; but of that—the commonest of earthly boons—there appeared to be no immediate prospect. By one of those strange caprices of Nature, which we find it so hard to understand, this woman, with the large tender heart, whose love for children, and indeed all helpless things, was almost intense, seemed destined (as the months wore on, and still there was no call for the pretty preparations which so delight the heart of a young, expectant mother) to be childless.

That this seemed not unlikely to be the case, was a constant source of aggravation to old Mrs. Beacham; and in moments of strong irritation against Honor, she would even go so far as to endeavour to make John share her feelings on the subject.

"It all comes of marrying a fine lady," she said one day, as her son, with the look of care that had grown habitual to his honest face, was taking what he called a "snack," previous to a hurried journey up to London on business. "In my time, married women had children, and plenty of 'em, if so be they kep their healths. There'd have been four of you, John, as you know, if I hadn't buried three, bless 'em! before they—"

"But, mother," said John, ruthlessly cutting short these maternal reminiscences, "Honor hasn't what you call her health; and what's more, no one can say with justice that I married a fine lady. Why, she was ready enough—too ready I might say—to work, a year ago. You just ask the Clays about her. Never sparing herself, and singing about the house like a bird. But that's all over now," he went on sadly. "She's so changed, Honor is, poor child!" and the rough, kind-hearted man gulped down a sigh as he looked back upon his vanished hopes, and on the fading vision of the wife who was so different,

he told himself, from the languid girl who shared his home.

“It’s my belief,” said Mrs. Beacham bluntly, “that she’s pining for the Colonel.”

“For the Colonel? D—n him!” burst forth John in one of those sudden passions that surprised as well as half-frightened those about him, “it’s too bad, it’s a deal too bad, to have that man for ever coming up between me and Honor! And yet I don’t believe it; upon my soul, I don’t believe it! It isn’t likely that just the name of being her father—for it’s nothing more—should make her think so much of him. Sometimes it comes into my head,” he went on meditatively, and cutting a huge slice off the brown loaf as he spoke, “sometimes I think that it would be better to break the ice, and talk to her about him. Of course, it’s only right to honour one’s parents; and I should be the last man, I hope, to backbite and to speak ill of another; but I think—God forgive me if I’m wrong, mother!—that it might be as well just to open Honor’s eyes a little about that same father of hers. If she knew—”

“You couldn’t do it, John; it wouldn’t be—as far as I can see—right; and though Honor is a love-child, and her father—according to you—would be in his proper place at Botany Bay, it isn’t for us to malign him to his own daughter. No,

John," the old woman continued, for notwithstanding her jealousy of Honor there existed in the old woman's heart a certain fund of good sense, as well as kindliness of nature, to fall back upon in time of need,—“no, John, we must trust to Providence that all will come right in time. There's good, after all, in Honor; and some day, perhaps, she will have done with whimsies, and take at last to sense.”

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY MILL HAS BUSINESS ON HAND.

“DID you in all your life ever see anyone so changed as that pretty Mrs. Beacham? Not less pretty, I don’t mean that; but she looks pale and serious, and to my thinking still more like a lady than she did when she was married!”

The words were Kate Vavasour’s—bright, cheerful, merry Kate—who was walking home on Christmas-day from church with her brother Horace—a “public man” now, and a very occasional and not over-willing visitor to his old home.

Several events of importance, events influencing more or less the wellbeing of certain individuals connected with this story, had occurred during the swiftly-passing months which had changed the year from midsummer to winter.

To begin with: Arthur Vavasour (who after his farewell meeting in Danescourt grounds had not again seen Honor Beacham) had,

according to expectation, been made one with Sophy Duberly before the altar. In less than a month from his coming of age, the marriage ceremony was celebrated with becoming pomp in London, the "happy pair" departing immediately afterwards for the Continent, bent—according to the newspapers—on a "lengthened tour abroad."

Nor did any long period elapse before Horace Vavasour also broke the weary chain that bound him to home. He had yearned for the long-hoped-for emancipation; but he experienced—a good deal to his surprise—when the time came for bidding adieu to Gillingham, very little of the exultation which he might naturally have expected to have been his portion. All unknown to himself, the home-raised lad had grown attached to the old place. The grumblings and complainings, the discontent, and the longing for change, were more a habit with him than the result of conviction; and when the hour of parting came, and he looked back on the tearful faces of his two sisters, standing gazing after him on the steps of the marble portico, Horace would gladly have given up all his cherished hopes to remain with those dear fellow-victims in the old home that he was leaving.

As was only natural, however, those regrets were not of long duration. Lady Millicent had

not made home so sweet to the children committed to her care, that they should continue for a lengthened period to pine for the few blessings which that home afforded. By swift degrees, regret for the past ceased to have a place in the memory of the absent one; whilst the recollection of the many privations, the dulness, and the tyrannous rules of far-away Gillingham, remained fixed, as with a sculptor's chisel, on his heart for ever.

Kate was during that, to her, dull Christmas time, the only daughter of the house at home, for Rhoda (an extremely unusual proceeding) had been allowed to accept of a pressing invitation from the Guernseys to spend a month with them in Paris.

"Two women were grinding at the mill," Kate said merrily to her brother, "and a jolly grind it was too! And it's just as well that one was taken, and a great bore that the other—meaning me—was left behind."

Horace, who had very good-naturedly given up several far pleasanter engagements for his sister's sake, and who purposed spending a dull week at the Chace with the kind purpose of enlivening poor Kate's worse than solitude, pinched her cheek playfully.

"All the same a hundred years hence," he said; and forthwith there commenced on both sides a

series of questions and answers necessitated by the separation of several months which had taken place between them. There was much to say. They were on their way to church when the conversation about Arthur and his wife began—about Arthur, who was said to be by no means cured of his reckless habits of extravagance, and whom Horace had parted with only a week before under the portico of the Grand Hotel in Paris.

“I didn’t think Sophy improved in looks; but then there is a reason, I believe, for that; and besides, she had been making lion-seeing a toil instead of a pleasure. She is a jolly girl, though; and I consider Arthur to be one of the luckiest fellows I know.”

“I wonder if he thinks so himself,” mused Kate.

“I daresay not. Do we ever value any of our blessings till we lose them? Do you think I cared much about this dear old place till I found myself tied to that precious office as a paid clerk? Sounds pretty considerable mean, as the Yankees say, doesn’t it, when one’s mamma has something about sixty thousand per annum?”

“But you like it, Racy. It’s better than *this*, I’m sure. Ah, how I should like to be you! and how I envy—no, I don’t envy Rhoda, because I’m glad she’s happy, poor dear; but I often think

what fun she's having, and I wonder whether it will ever be my turn to go away."

"Your turn? God knows, my poor Kitty! It takes a longer head than mine or yours to fathom my lady's projects. I heard from old Randolph the last thing before I left town yesterday that she was after some underhand work about the entail. She'll never rest, I feel certain, till she upsets that clause, or whatever they call it, in my grandfather's will which gives the reins of power to Arthur after he attains the age of twenty-five. Poor old Atty! I foresee no end of worry and bother for him if the news of this gets about; but we must hope the best, as Randolph says, while we prepare ourselves for the worst."

Old Josh Randolph, as he was familiarly called, had been for very many years the trusted solicitor and man of business of the Vavasour family. A better-hearted and a more truly honest man—as all who knew him allowed—never existed than Joshua Randolph, as one proof of which it may be recorded in his favour that he had made no large fortune out of the quarrels and cantankerousness of his clients. Neither—to his credit be it recorded—had he ever taken undue advantage of their necessities. Young Vavasour, who had known "Josh" from the time when the heir-apparent was a lad at Eton, had had recourse to the old man's advice in

many a boyish scrape, and later, when the handsome youth had grown to be a man, and his "entanglements" were of a more complicated and less venial character, old Josh was still the attorney to whose counsels he turned, and who had never (all praise to him) been detected in that unfeeling act of pilfering, namely, that of *making* occasions for the swelling of his lawyer's bill.

This rarely excellent individual had heard with regret and shame that work for the long-robed gentlemen was likely, through Lady Millicent's bitter discontent, to be ere long cut out. He made no secret of his opinion on the subject, and Lady Millicent, finding that the family lawyer was not the "man for her money," soon removed the light of her countenance from the steady, old-fashioned firm of which Mr. Randolph was the senior partner. Her ladyship's first visit in the Lincoln's-inn chambers (where old Josh received her with a slow and respectful courtesy, but without a grain of subservience either in his speech or manner) was also the last. Far too *slow*, perhaps indeed too rigidly honest, for the requirements of the *maîtresse femme* was the steady-going anti-progress solicitor. There was something in the very air of that business-room of his, an air redolent of musty respectability, that was utterly out of harmony and keeping with Lady Millicent's grand

manner, her rapid energetic movements, and the authoritative mode of speech which she habitually adopted. The experiment had been duly tried of taking the old man by surprise and startling him into acquiescence; but never—it did not greatly grieve the faithful Josh that so it was—did the great lady of Gillingham give a second thought to the inhabitant of that dingy room piled high with japanned deed-boxes and with ancient faded folios. The lawyer's absence of sympathy in her ladyship's cause was evidenced in every response he made to her questions and suggestions. A cautious man he was and a composed—one not to be lightly moved from his opinions, and who deemed the will of the late Earl of Gillingham a document almost sacred in its character. When Lady Millicent astonished the clerks at Messrs. Randolph and Bretts' by the apparition of her stately person, she was far indeed from imagining that anything short of the most obsequious compliance with her wishes, and the most thorough and flattering approbation of her views and projects, would be the result of her condescension; and to a certain degree there was justification for her expectations. On the face of it, and at the first cursory view of the unmotherly mother's purpose, there was certainly something that was, at the least, plausible, to justify her undertaking. The late earl's will had

been made very late in life, and long after Lady Millicent had been taught (no difficult task) to consider herself the future possessor, during her natural life, of that rich inheritance. In causing the important clause which deposed after a certain period the mother *regnante* in favour of the grown-up son, Lord Gillingham had, in his daughter's opinion, departed in a most unjustifiable manner from the ways of his forefathers. Manifestly (as it was her purpose to prove) it was flagrantly unjust that such a will should stand. Long ago she had taken (privately) high legal opinions on the subject. She had consulted law-books, and entered largely into the question of precedents; the result of all which exertion and study was the visit to Lincoln's-inn, which had been productive of nothing save anger and mortification. But because Lady Millicent could "make nothing" of the old lawyer, who was staunch in his adherence to Arthur Vavasour's interests, it by no means followed that she felt any doubt either as to the rectitude of her project, or the advisableness of pursuing it to the end. She was a woman—as we know—of determined character, and, moreover, one in whom difficulty and opposition only increased in a tenfold degree the desire to succeed; so, without any unnecessary delay, she opened negotiations with another legal adviser, who took a different and more satisfactory

view of the matter than that adopted by the uncompromising Josh; and one consequence of this proceeding was the remark made by Horace Vavasour to his sister Kate, on the ill consequences likely to accrue to Arthur from the bare rumour even of the proceeding in question.

"But how can it hurt Atty so very much?" Kate asked. She was puzzled, and not without reason, by the anomaly, that Arthur, who had married that "immense" heiress, and of whom the millionaire Mr. Duberly was said to be so fond, could be injured in any way by the report of Lady Millicent's law-proceedings.

"How!" Horace repeated hesitatingly, and then broke out: "How! Why because from the time he was sixteen—from my poor father's death almost—poor Atty has played the fool. And such a fool! Not having the most remote idea either of the value of money or of the wickedness of men and women; with our good father in his grave, and with—but we won't talk of *her*. Poor old Atty! How often in those times that seem so long ago now, and so miserable—and yet what almost children we both were—he and I have crept at night into each other's rooms to consult in our blind ignorance on what could by any possibility be done! Such a heap of silly ideas as we propounded then; such methods as we turn by turn

proposed to keep the knowledge of poor Atty's bills and foolishness from my mother!"

"I daresay that it would have been much better had she known it all then," suggested Kate.

"Of course it would have been a thousand times better," rejoined Horace, who was beginning to show some deference to his sister's opinions; "but how were we to find courage enough to be open? I ask you, Kate—and no one could answer the question better—whether milady is the kind of mother to whom the most morally courageous lad in existence could, without a good deal of winding-up, confess that he had run-up bills, had betted on the great boat-race, had been to the Jews, and, in short, was no more worthy to be called her son?"

"Poor dear Atty! I don't wonder he couldn't do it; and I suppose (I can guess now, when I remember all the trouble he so often seemed to be in) that those bills never were paid, and that—"

"Not only not paid, but *more*, to the tune of thousands upon thousands, added to their amount. And then the Jews! But what's the use of telling you, child, about such things? Here we are at the church-door, and we shall find milady—God forgive her!—saying her prayers with as much devotion as if—"

"Hush," remonstrated Kate, feeling the indecorum, especially standing as they two did, on God's-acre, of speaking harsh truths concerning their only remaining parent; "hush, Racy dear, she *is* our mother; let us try to remember it, however much she may do to put the fact out of our heads."

"Did you ever see any one so changed as that pretty Mrs. Beacham? Still more like a lady even than she used to be—I mean, she hasn't the same fresh *country* look that everyone admired so before. Mr. Delmaine thinks her both out of health and out of spirits; he said so yesterday afternoon to me when mamma and I went to the church to see the decorations. She attends to her class, though, at the school just the same as ever, and gets the children on wonderfully with their singing. How well they sang the anthem to-day! and all, Mr. Delmaine says, thanks to Mrs. John Beacham."

Rather to Kate's disappointment, her brother did not enter with much apparent interest into the question of Honor's illness or her merits. And yet he *was* interested in John's pretty, pensive-looking wife, more interested than could well be explained to the young girl walking by his side. There were many circumstances in Honor's short

life which were perforce unknown to the high-born and carefully-reared Katherine, whose secluded life kept her very little *au fait* of the doings and sayings of the outer world. Of the former intimacy of her brother at Updown Paddocks she had heard little or nothing; nor, though it was more than probable that the "ower true tale" of Honor's birth had reached Miss Vavasour's ears, was the subject one which could well be touched upon with a discreetly-brought-up young lady. Under these circumstances, it is only natural that Horace Vavasour should have manifested some unwillingness to pursue the subject touched upon by his sister. Concerning one cause, amongst others, of Mrs. John Beacham's lowness of spirits he might have entertained his own ideas, but those ideas he, for the moment, wisely kept to himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

HONOR FEELS LIKE A "LADY."

OF all the many changes that had taken place amongst the characters in my story, none was more thorough, even though its features might be less boldly marked, than that which had gradually crept over the household of excellent John Beacham. From the moment when he dealt the blow that levelled his wife's worthless parent to the ground, John had never been exactly the same man. A sense of failure, of a disastrous fall in his own esteem, was in some measure the cause of this woeful alteration: but there was more, and far worse than this, at the bottom of his apparent moroseness, of his often sullen temper, and of what his mother called his "silent ways." There was far worse indeed than this—far worse than any morbid impression that he himself had sunk in the opinion of the world at large; for there was the sight of Honor's altered face, and a near prospect, nearer day by day, of some cruel domestic

change for this honest, single-hearted man, whose youth and manhood had hitherto passed so uneventfully.

The summer had passed away, the autumn-time had come and gone ; from the hedge-rows of the Paddocks the last lingering leaves had fallen, and another new year was about, with the accustomed rejoicings, to be ushered in, but still things had not improved in John's altered home. No sunshine of the heart brightened up the old walls, and yet, for all that inside there was gloom, it was necessary, for old custom's sake, that the show of merriment should be kept up ; for Christmas-time was nigh at hand, and hospitality, as well as jollity, had, time out of mind, been, at that festive season, the order of the day at Peartree-house. To give and distribute largely and ungrudgingly at the dying-out of the old year had ever been an institution in Mrs. Beacham's family. "The Turtons," she was wont to say (John's mother was—as of course all the world knew—a Turton of Cradock, in the West Riding of York) "The Turtons always kep a good table at Christmas-time both for rich and poor, in their own county ; and I'm not going to do different, though this *is* Sandys-shire. Christmas comes but once a year, and it's only right that when it does come, them as *can* afford it should give them as can't their bellies full."

In furtherance of this charitable object, preparations for feeding the hungry began betimes in the spacious kitchen of Peartree-house. No stronger proof could be adduced of the fact, that albeit often cross, disagreeable, and snappish in the privacy of home, Mrs. Beacham was, *au fond*, generous and kindhearted, as the manner in which, on the grand occasion of Christmas-time, she fulfilled her welcome duties could fully testify.

"L'année est morte, vive l'année!" The old cry has been cried, and the old song sung, till some of us are weary of the semi-joyous and all solemn sound; but the good Samaritan at the Paddocks addressed herself, even as she had done for fifty years, to the congenial task before her; and, as I said before, the old kitchen of the farm-house reeked with preparations for the coming festival. Such a kitchen as it was! The ceiling half-covered from beam to beam with fitches of well-smoked bacon—with a store of precious delf, and a glittering *batterie de cuisine* in the shape of pots and pans, that excited envy in the hearts of half the housewives in the neighbourhood; and with a chimney so wide-mouthed and gaping that the largest spit in Sandysshire would have been scarcely long enough to span it!

The amount of fuel consumed in that "kitchen

range” was, as Mrs. Beacham was given proudly to say, what nobody would believe; and yet if any of these incredulous ones had chanced to catch a glimpse at Christmas-time of that same furnace, methinks that their doubts regarding its consuming powers would, like other and more material things under its influence, have melted into thin air.

Many were the mouths which the hospitable widow felt called upon that day to fill. There was the great “house dinner” as it was called—to which were invited (a yearly custom so ancient at the Paddocks that the invitation had come to be regarded as a right) every man and boy employed by Mr. Beacham upon the farm and breeding-establishment. To these were added not only the wives and daughters of the middle-aged labourers, but the “followers”—if they were respectable, and their courtship was *pour le bon motif*—from adjacent farms, of the damsels connected with John’s especial retainers. It was a great object with the givers of the feast that everyone, on that day at least, should both be and look happy. On all other days (Sundays excepted) John was, though a just and liberal, very far from what is called an easy-going master. He required his good penny’s-worth for the penny given; and men taking service at Updown Paddocks did so with their

eyes open—knowing that under the eye of their new master there would be little chance of shirking the duties they had undertaken.

By retainers so kept *to* their work, and *in* their places, it will readily be believed that the Christmas dinner at the Paddocks (which took place at three o'clock on Christmas-day) was an event of importance; and after the roast-beef and turkeys, the plum-pudding and mince-pies—plum-pudding with plenty of raisins and citron, let me tell you, and mince-pies fit for a lord-mayor's dinner—had been duly discussed, there followed a dance in the big barn, with punch and pipes to wind up the entertainment.

Many months had not elapsed since the time when few would have enjoyed the simple pleasures of that holiday season more thoroughly in her quiet, lady-like way" than Honor Beacham. Those months, swiftly passing, dull and uneventful as they had seemed, had transformed, as effectually as years of age and experience, a light-hearted and thoughtless girl into a dreaming, restless, and far from contented woman. Change, with noiseless foot and imperceptible approach—change, never resting, and for ever at its silent work, had done its appointed task on pretty Honor Beacham's tastes and character.

Nor for honest John himself had the sure

work of time and change been done less effectually than it had been accomplished for his wife. Not that any alteration was observable in his outward habits, for in truth he was busier and more active than ever, more engrossed with business cares, and, in Honor's opinion, redder in the face, and in the evening time still more given than of yore, to silence and to slumber. His deep love for his young wife had not diminished; but busy men cannot afford, as Mrs. Beacham had been heard say, to "make a noodle of a woman." In her day, men had something else to do than to be talking nonsense to a wife, and Honor must learn to do without such silliness. And Honor—as many a young wife has done before her, and as wives will do to the end of time—did learn the salutary lesson, that women are not married to be *toys*, and that for them, as well as for the bread-winners of the family, "life is real, life is earnest;" and that to "wait" does not comprise the whole duty of woman. Gradually—not so gradually, however, but that Honor perceived, with mixed anger and sadness, that so it was—John grew to be less mindful of her presence, and more forgetful of those *petits noms* of affection, those delicate attentions with which the busiest men in the early days of matrimony are in the habit of indulging their newly-bought

toys. At that period of her life, it would have been well for Honor if to work had been one of the necessities of her being. With the instinct born of natural good sense and a desire to do right, she understood this truth, and made more than one effort to be permitted a share in the light daily toil which the old lady so jealously reserved for herself alone. She was naturally, as John used to say in the days of his courtship, when Honor was far too intent upon her paid-for duties to walk with or talk to him—she was naturally a "busy little thing," and her time, now that she was a lady at large, often hung with perilous heaviness upon her hands. That old Mrs. Beacham was the last woman in the world to understand such a character as that of the young girl whom her son had sworn at the altar to love, honour, and cherish, has been made more than sufficiently evident; nor, even had she been able to comprehend Honor's peculiar idiosyncrasies of disposition, would the old lady have been qualified, either through evenness of temper or steadiness of purpose, to guide her daughter-in-law in a safe and rightful path. Although, as time wore on, she was, in some respects (and in consequence chiefly of John's diminution of *outward* conjugal affection towards his wife) more disposed to make the best of that erring young

person, yet Honor was often reminded to her cost, that you *never could be sure of Mrs. Beacham*. Even at the exceptional season, when so many hearts and purses (I speak of those who boast such luxuries) are open, and when cantankerous feelings are supposed to be lulled to rest, the old lady at Updown Paddocks did, as will speedily be seen, allow her temper to crop up, to the great hindrance of individual and general enjoyment in the house over which she ruled.

“I suppose you mean to come and see the dance, Mrs. John?” (Honor was always “Mrs. John” with her mother-in-law, when the latter chose to fancy that her son’s wife was remembering the fact that in her veins ran the gentle blood of the Norcotts). “The people are used to see John, and as I always come in to have our healths drank, maybe they might be expecting you as well.”

It was seven o’clock, and they, the scarcely congenial trio, were sitting silently, that Christmas afternoon, in the little parlour, resting after the labours of the day; John reading the *Farmer’s Gazette*, and Honor musing silently in a big arm-chair, her habitual seat. In answer to the old lady’s question, she replied that she was quite willing to go, that there was no hardship in walking across the farmyard to the barn. The

evening was fine—looking a little like frost, she thought.

"The sunset was beautiful," Honor went on to say, falling back upon the commonplace, when she found her mother-in-law looking cross and dissatisfied at her lukewarm acquiescence. "I watched it from the hill above the garden. Such masses of red and purple, and such curious-shaped clouds! Did you notice it, John, before you came in?"

John was unfortunately at that moment so intent upon an article in the *Gazette* which touched upon a pet system of his own, that Honor's question failed to strike upon his ear. The reason of his silence was perceived by her at once, and, like a good wife, she forbore to repeat her very trivial observation. All, therefore, would have been well, and no evil consequences would have followed on John's wholly involuntary sin of omission, had not Mrs. Beacham, who chanced to be in rather an irritating mood, taxed her daughter indirectly with the terrible crime, in the old lady's sight, of fineladyism.

"Ha, ha, ha! I beg your pardon, though, Mrs. John, for laughing, but it is a good joke to hear you asking us busy folk if we've been amusing ourselves with looking at the sun! The sun indeed! My patience! To hear a woman grown like you talking such nonsense!"

“I don’t think,” said Honor, flushing up, “that it can quite be called nonsense looking at the beautiful things that God has given us to enjoy. I have nothing to do, either. I often wish I had. I read, and I draw, and work a little; but I often wish I was obliged to be busy. I shouldn’t think then, and I hate thinking.”

She had gone rambling on as if talking to herself. The fact that neither of her two companions were in the slightest degree capable of entering into the more sickly than sensible fancies of her young brain, had totally escaped her recollection, and she was startled, and that not agreeably, when John, laying down the paper he was studying, looked half sternly and half anxiously at his wife. He had not listened—who ever does listen to anything of the kind with entire impunity,—he had not listened without its producing some effect upon his mind, to his mother’s constant remarks and insinuations regarding his wife’s conduct and character. Since Arthur Vavasour’s marriage, and the consequent entire cessation of his visits at the Paddock, that *raw* had necessarily healed; but unfortunately those whose nature it is to buzz about the sore places which will sometimes even in the healthiest skin be found, are never at a loss to detect the peccant spots, while to keep the

venom rankling in the wound is to them a pleasant, chiefly because it is an exciting, task.

It may seem strange to those who have not made human nature their study, that Mrs. Beacham—dearly loving her son—should have seemed to take positive delight in certain hints and allusions which, as she well knew, could not fail both to give him pain and to intensify the coldness which too evidently was beginning to exist between himself and his wife. If anyone had accused the old woman of the sins of mischief-making and evil-speaking, her surprise and indignation would have been great and vehement. In her own mind she probably believed that, by constantly endeavouring to make it appear that Honor, since the discovery of her birth, and her temporary association with those above her, had grown proud and fanciful and discontented, she, John's mother, was simply doing her duty—a duty which had for its aim and object the wholesome correcting of "Mrs. John," and the expedient enlightenment of a mind—her son's, to wit—that was blinded by the mists of uxorious folly. That Mrs. Beacham was herself rendered happy by the state of things existing at the Paddocks must not be supposed; but that she was not so, proved only another exciting cause for the attacks upon Honor, which, whilst John often felt real uneasiness for Honor's evident delicacy

of health, worried the poor man terribly. Sometimes—not often, or probably his mother would have shown herself far more lenient to the pale-faced girl, who never disputed her will, but whose very submission was an aggravation—sometimes, as on the present occasion, John would turn angrily upon Honor, speaking sharply to her, after the fashion of even the best-tempered men who, without being able either to understand the *why*, or to suggest a remedy for the evil, find the comfort of their home broken up, through, as it seems to them, the wilfulness or the valetudinarianism of a woman!

“It strikes me, Honor,” he said, laying down the paper which he had ostensibly been studying, and speaking in a cold hard tone, at which his wife inwardly rebelled, “it strikes me that you have been talking a precious deal of what I call nonsense. You ‘do this,’ and you ‘don’t do it;’ You *think*, and you ‘hate thinking.’ Upon my soul, I’m ashamed, and that’s the truth, to hear you talk such rubbish. Now, I’ll just tell you what it is. I met Dr. Kempshall yesterday, and we got talking a little about you. Says he, laughing, ‘I tell you what it is, Beacham; you are spoiling that wife of yours by kindness. Women are delightful creatures,’ says he; ‘but it doesn’t do to let them have *all* their own way. She wants shaking up a

bit, she does ; and, above all, she mustn't—take my word for it—be given way to. Those nerves that young women talk about are the deuce and all when they get too much ahead ;' and, upon my soul, I begin to think he's right."

The ready tears rose to Honor's eyes at this unexpected rebuke ; while, alas, swift as the lightning's flash, the thought that *one* she had known in days gone by would not have used her so, darted through her brain.

"I did not mean to be troublesome; I beg your pardon," she said, with a half proud, half sad submission which almost frightened John ; and then, slowly rising from her chair, she left the two alone to talk over her behaviour as it pleased them best.

Honor Beacham had now known for many a month the true and rightful cause of a discontent and a misery which, however little justified by that cause, grew daily less endurable. That cause, she understood full well at last, had always, ever since the day when she accepted the hand of plain John Beacham, been in existence. It had required, however, certain concurrent events to bring it fully and unquestionably to light ; and those concurrent events had not, unfortunately, been wanting in the home of Honor Beacham. The real and very melancholy truth, to leave off speaking darkly,

lay in this—namely, that Honor Beacham was perfectly unsuited, not only to the life she was fated to lead, but also to that most excellent John himself. Something of this had been dimly shadowed out to her in the early days of courtship; but more, far more, was revealed when the dry and uninteresting details of home life took the place of honeyed words and pleasing compliments. But it was reserved (is it not mostly so?) for the force of *contrast* to put the finishing touch to such deadly domestic discoveries as these. Very trying to Honor, after she had grown familiar with the refined voice, the subdued laugh, and all the conventional *graces* (as they appeared to her) of Arthur Vavasour, was the jubilant hilarity, the rather noisy speech, and, alas, the occasional philological lapses of her socially-untutored husband. Slowly, yet very surely, the evil worked, undermining imperceptibly the moral system, and rendering insecure the foundations of poor little Honor's more rational hopes of happiness. But it was not till the memorable day when she made the discovery that in her veins ran purer blood than that which coursed with such a full and healthy flow through the arteries of her yeoman husband, that the mischief that had long been brewing began seriously to develop itself. Then the semi-Celtic girl, retiring into the fastnesses

more of a perilous fastidiousness than of a vulgar commonplace pride, threw far away from her with reckless hand the happiness that was within her reach; and dark was the looming of coming events, which, although she saw it not, cast its shadow before her onward path. From the moment when Colonel Norcott, whose misdeeds were not unfortunately (as a warning to others) stamped upon his forehead, addressed and acknowledged her as his child, the bonds that bound this foolish Honor to the farmer of Updown Paddocks hung very heavily on her mind.

Yet, reader, I pray you not to blame her too severely for her involuntary fault. There was no ugly root of pride, no taint of what Mrs. Beacham called "fine-ladyism," at the bottom of poor Honor's loathing of a lot that on the surface seemed so prosperous and happy. No one—no, not even her severest judges, not even John's prejudiced parent—could condemn more sternly than did the girl herself her worse than coldness towards her husband—her black ingratitude towards Heaven. But it was in vain she strove against the feelings which her conscience whispered were so base and wicked. In vain she told herself how good her husband was, how honest, how respected, and how generous. Honesty, generosity, and respectability are excellent things in their way. With

them to back him up, a man may defy change, and winter and rough weather. He may go through life with honour, and to his grave lamented; but, alas for him, such gifts may fail to win a woman's love, or bind her truant fancy. Still, as I said, or rather, perhaps, *implied* before, if Honor had never chanced to mix with what the world calls gentlemen, poor John's lack of refinement (vulgar he never could be called), his occasional conversational solecisms, his hands (a trifle red and rough), his boisterous laugh, and his general ignorance of the ways and speech of delicately-reared people, would not, in Honor's opinion, have told so heavily against him—would not, in short, have so shamed, so repelled, and so—for it came at last to that sad climax—have so entirely disgusted her.

The absence of refinement in her husband's manners and mode of speech had never struck Honor so vividly as on the occasion of her return to Pear-tree House after the ten days which she had passed at the Bell. The room in which her father had lain there was but a poor one; smaller and far less comfortably furnished than the nuptial chamber at the farm. The little room, too, near to it, which had been appointed for her especial use, and where, lying awake in the silent watches of the night, she had wept and wondered, so passing strange was the mutation that a turn in the

wheel of Fortune had brought about, was scarcely larger than a closet; but it was near her father! "Father!" what a sweet sound it had for her, that word, and new as it was sweet. Twenty times a day did she repeat it in a soft caressing whisper, that only her own heart could hear; and very tender grew the large blue eyes, gazing on the nobly-shaped head, lying so still and motionless upon the hard inn-pillow.

It was not till two days and nights had elapsed since the accident, and Colonel Fred Norcott was pronounced on the road to convalescence, that Honor found either time or inclination to notice the, to her, wondrous elegance and refinement of the sick man and his surroundings. Once perceived, she was never weary of admiring what was to her so new, and so in harmony with her own natural tastes. The very sound of her parent's voice, low and measured, the almost womanly beauty of his *soignéés* hands, the marvellous details of his dressing-case, his ivory hair-brushes; why had not John a dressing-case, and beautiful handles like those, instead of—but what need is there to dwell either on honest John's shortcomings, or on the thousand and one details which, absurd and improbable as it may seem, went far towards working a revolution in Honor's feelings, and sent her back to her husband's side an altered and a worse than

discontented woman. Worse than discontented, inasmuch as the change which had been wrought in her was beyond her own control either to modify or to conceal; worse than discontented, in that it was scarcely likely that this newly-born fastidiousness would be less than fatal to the conjugal happiness of which there had been once so fair a promise in the quiet prosperous home of Updown Paddocks.

CHAPTER XV.

COLONEL NORCOTT FEELS PATERNAL.

IN a small drawing-room on the first floor of a house in Stanwick-street, two persons were, one cold morning towards the end of April, seated at a late and very metropolitan-looking breakfast. Of those two persons Colonel Frederick Norcott was one. His outward man, as regarded dress at least, had not improved since last we saw him, some eight months ago, *flâneing* in the grounds of Danescourt. A short and somewhat nondescript garment, one which might once have done duty as a shooting-jacket, but which had degenerated into a coat of many uses (namely, one that its owner was in the habit of dressing, smoking, and, as in the present instance, breakfasting in) was greasy and out at elbows. The Colonel's throat, a scraggy one, as is customary with middle-aged gentlemen who "keep their figures," was exposed, by reason of an open shirt-collar, to view, and as he discon-

tentedly munched, with his still strong teeth, the untempting lodging-house fare provided for him, the expression of the Colonel's countenance was not precisely what could be called a bright and a "shining morning face" on that warm April day.

The "colonial lady," seated opposite to her lord, and watching the changes of his countenance in hopes to discover therein some sign or token by which to regulate her remarks, was, as I before hinted, a lady of faded and "washed out" appearance (*entre les deux âges*), willing still, as was only natural, to be admired, but swamping all such womanly aspirations in her deep devotion for, and her overweening appreciation of, the man who had honoured her with his empty pockets and his once-respected name.

"You sent that letter to the post, of course," said the Colonel, pushing away his chair from the table, and preparing for some of the unwelcome business of the day. The remark was scarcely an interrogative one, for the master of the Stanwick-street lodging had on the previous day made known to his submissive wife the wish that she should write in his name a certain letter on a certain subject, and it had never occurred to him as possible that Mrs. Norcott could have delayed the duty of attending to his wishes.

"Honor will of course answer the letter at

once," continued Fred, "and I should not wonder (let me see, to-day is Wednesday) if she were to be here the end of the week."

Mrs. Norcott, a lady of an habitually pallid complexion, flushed slightly on hearing these remarks. It was not often, to do her justice, that she ventured on independent action, but in the instance alluded to she had been rash enough to arrogate to herself, though in a very mild degree, one of the most valued privileges of her sex.

"I am very sorry," she began, endeavouring to cover her confusion by renewed attentions to the tea-pot; "I thought that you hardly meant it. You spoke in a hurry, and as Mr. Vavasour was here, I could not well ask you whether I *was* to write or not."

Colonel Norcott rose from his chair impatiently.

"What a confounded nuisance!" he exclaimed, planting himself autocratically upon the rug, with his back towards the empty fire-grate. "Another day lost, and Vavasour, who—" He stopped short, not in confusion; Fred was not the man to be easily what is called flabbergasted, but there were limits, and very strongly marked ones too, to his confidential intercourse with Mrs. N., and these he probably felt that he had been on the point of overstepping.

"You ought to have known," he went on peevishly, "that it is of consequence to me—that I am anxious, in short, to have Honor here, and what the d—l made you think for yourself in the matter is more than I can guess. Come now, out with it," he continued, growing momentarily more irritated, and in proportion as the poor colonial heiress seemed disposed to silence, working himself up to a determination that she should give a reason for the fear that was in her; "out with it! I suppose you have some excuse for not doing as I wished, and that excuse I am standing on this rug to hear."

Thus apostrophised, the unlucky woman had no choice but to obey, which she prepared to do in evident trepidation and discomposure.

"Now, Frederick," she began, putting a large bony hand to her brow, "you really might have a little mercy on my poor 'ead" (as if, *par parenthèse*, any man ever had much pity on a plain wife with big fingers, who dropped her h's and bored him with her ailments); "I've got the most dreadful 'eadache, and your voice this morning does go through it so! About Mrs. Beacham I really thought—"

"Go on, will you?" growled the Colonel.

"Well, I really thought, now I did indeed, that it would never do. In the first place, though

I didn't see much of her 'usband, it was plain enough to me that he's not the kind of man to let his wife go gadding off to London; and even if he did, why, Frederick, how in the name of goodness are we to make her comfortable here? Unless you gave up your bedroom—"

"O, hang that!" from Colonel Fred.

"Well, but unless you did, there's no place for her to sleep in but the attic next to mine. I would let her have mine," continued the good-natured woman, "but that's small and wretched enough; however, there's no use, I'm certain, in talking of it, for Mr. Beacham would as soon see her go up in a balloon as set off by herself to London."

Apparently, the Colonel was a little taken aback by the force of his wife's arguments, for he paused a while before he replied, and then said, almost hesitatingly:

"The only thing would be to say that I am ill. Honor would come directly then. That blockhead of a horse-breaker has scruples of conscience about that disgusting crack over the skull he gave me, and would never refuse his wife leave to come, if he had the most remote idea that I was still suffering from the effects of the blow."

There could scarcely be a stronger proof of the melancholy fact that poor Bessie was not now for the first time cognisant of her husband's tricks

and dodges than the little surprise she evinced at Colonel Fred's spirited suggestion. She listened at first in silence, thinking over in her mind the pros and cons regarding the chances of successfully carrying out his plans: while not for a moment did it occur to her to raise an objection on high moral grounds to the trap which was about to be set for the unwary. The class of wives of which Mrs. Norcott is the type are, as a rule, a cowardly class; and, moreover, they are women who, taking *perhaps* too lowly an estimate of themselves, and *certainly* too high a one of their partners, are ready to buy the rare smiles, and equally rare meed of approbation which falls to their lot, by a mean and truculent subserviency, which in reality gains for them neither affection nor esteem. As is usual, however, with persons who are destitute of moral courage, Mrs. Norcott would have gladly compromised with her conscience, and changed the whole lie for a half one.

"If it had only been last week," she said musingly, "when you had that bad cold upon your chest, it might have been done quite easily."

"Easily! Of course it could, and so I suppose it can now. Come, let us have the table cleared. Gad, how dirty the lodging-house drab is before the small hours come round again! I say, Polly," to the parlour-maid, who entered in

answer to the summons of the bell, and whom, being rather good-looking, he took the trouble to lecture—"I say, Polly, what is soap a pound, and hair-brushes? What do you think you were given such pretty hair for, if it was never to be oiled? If I were you—"

But here poor patient Bessie interposed, not angrily; she carried her blind idolatry of her profligate husband to the extent of wishing him to be pleased—*coute qui coute*; but the owner of the house, a person of strict principles, had spoken seriously to her about the Colonel's free manner with her maidens, so, to avoid a greater annoyance to her big, spoiled, selfish tyrant, the self-sacrificing Bessie suggested that Polly had better be allowed to "take away" in peace. The operation, however, being over, the Colonel returned to the charge, namely, the letter to his daughter, which he had so much at heart. As regarded Honor's probable discomfort in the attic which, in Stanwick-street, she would be condemned to occupy, he had an argument all ready for his use. Honor was passionately fond of riding, and, as Arthur Vavasour had told him, could ride both boldly and gracefully. Now, the parsimony which was conspicuous in the Tyburnian lodging did not pervade—and, indeed, might be said to be in some measure the consequence of

extravagance in—other branches of Colonel Norcott's expenditure. He kept two horses—*screws* in reality, though producing a good effect in the eyes of the uninitiated—on the remnant of poor Bessie's overrated fortune. On one of these horses it was his purpose, should he be so fortunate as to obtain Mr. Beacham's consent to his wife's visit, to mount the beautiful girl (for *girl* in appearance and manner Honor still was) in the Park, and among the crowds whom her unprincipled father nothing doubted would do due homage to her loveliness.

“It is all nonsense about her being uncomfortable,” he said decidedly. “What does a fine, handsome, healthy girl care about discomfort? Honor will like to see a little of life: why, she has never—you would hardly believe in such absurdity—seen a play or an opera in her life! And she is deuced fond of music, and sings, Vavasour says, like—like anything. So now sit down, there's a good soul, and write the letter. You must make me out devilish seedy, and all that kind of thing. See how well you can do it, now;” and he patted her broad, bony shoulders with a fascinating semblance of affection that Bessie, even under still less auspicious circumstances, would have found it impossible to withstand. She was about, under that delightful compulsion, to commit

a very unworthy act, but “the *man* beguiled” her; and Mrs. Frederick Norcott, not for the first time, laid aside for the Colonel’s sake her lingering scruples, and did as she was bid.

CHAPTER XVI.

JOHN DECIDES AGAINST HIMSELF.

IF anything, John and his wife were—as the pleasant spring-time came on apace—happier in their *ménage* than had been the case some months before. It was not in Honor's nature to dwell long either upon real or imaginary grievances, and moreover John had been so wonderfully, so more than ever, kind and good. He had seemed—quite silently, and with more tact than could have been expected of him—both to understand, and to set himself to remedy, the causes for Honor's silly discontent. To Mrs. Beacham's vexation—for she could bear less than ever that Honor should be spoilt—new books found their way, for its young mistress's delectation, to the farm; the last and prettiest opera-music was sure to make its appearance there almost before Honor could have read of its reception by the critics, and—still stronger proof of John's unwearied affection—he had taken by almost imperceptible degrees to

amending his *dress*, and to an extreme watchfulness lest he should offend her with his tongue.

At that period of their joint matrimonial lives, there seemed to be a renewed prospect of happiness for one of the best and truest-hearted of men with the sweet young wife on whose love he had set his heart. There was no idle and *désœuvré* young gentleman now at hand to whisper compliments in the prettiest of ears; no handsome, high-bred *roué* to place himself in juxtaposition with a husband's more homely features and less finished manners. But *proh dolor!* The thorn in the side was ever there; grievously and daily pinched the household shoe; for Mrs. Beaucham's temper, her love of power, and her jealousy of John, rather increased than diminished, thus almost neutralising the good effects of time, and of the real and inborn excellence of the two hearts which she seemed fated to torment.

The winter had been an unusually severe one. The frost that was foretold by Honor on Christmas-day—the day when, pleading a headache, she escaped the compliment of being wished health and happiness by her husband's retainers—proved a severe and lasting one. For weeks, without a change or check, the north wind blew over the frost-bound earth. Heavily on leaf and branch hung a pall of snow, wearily plodded the feet

of men whose daily toil was an unneeded thing; fuel grew scarcer day by day, and all nature, whether animate or inanimate, that was not rich, suffered.

During all the months that had elapsed since Colonel Norcott took his departure from the Bell, Honor had heard but little of her father. He and his wife had spent both the autumn and the winter abroad—where, Honor had not heard; for Mrs. Baker, whom she saw as frequently as the considerable distance between their respective homes (to say nothing of crotchety Mr. Baker) permitted, was never very communicative on the subject of her son's whereabouts.

For a time Honor had lamented in secret over what she wrongfully believed to be her father's forgetfulness of her existence. She had thought of, and hoped so much of happiness from her new ties, that when all that had occurred during that summer fortnight seemed likely to pass away as a dream that is forgotten, she sorrowed over it in exceeding heaviness of heart. Nor had the Colonel's attempts to astonish the weak mind of his daughter, by opening out to her view some of the wonders of the, to her, unknown world, been without their effect in unhinging that mind, and unfitting it for a while for the everyday duties of her simple and uneventful life. Honest John was

not far wrong when he decided that the "scoundrelly colonel" was beguiling the hours of sickness by describing to Honor something of the world of which she knew so little; but while surmising this, the worthy yeoman was quite incapable of fathoming the real motives of a deed that seemed so simple. How was he to imagine it possible that this man, who had voluntarily confessed to him (John) the heartless crime of which he had been guilty, should have done so solely with the design of reaping from his daughter's beauty a harvest of advantage to himself? And yet, improbable as well as repulsive as this must appear, it was no other than the truth. There existed perhaps no accurately-defined plan in this model parent's brain for the gathering to himself individual advantage from the judicious display of Honor's loveliness; but it is none the less true that he had heard, and recollected with satisfaction, certain hints, corroborated by the evidence of his own senses, of Arthur Vavasour's passionate admiration for John Beacham's wife. That he was in some distant way connected with the prodigal heir of Gillingham—connected, that is, through the sale and purchase of John Beacham's promising yearling, the reader may perhaps remember; how and to what purpose that connec-

tion was afterwards improved, remains to be made apparent.

The period to which I have brought my story, is, as has already been shown, the middle of the month of April. Honor had been nearly a year a wife, and the season, after the long and severe winter, seemed likely to be a genial one.

On Wednesday morning, the Wednesday of which mention was made in the preceding chapter, a letter (no very common occurrence) had arrived for Mrs. John Beacham by the morning's post. It was a large and somewhat portentous-looking missive, directed in a hand unknown at the Paddocks, and when Honor came down to breakfast she found it lying ostentatiously upon her plate; while the old lady, eyeing it askance, was waiting, with as much patience as she could summon to her aid, the moment of disclosure.

Honor took up her letter, and, as is the frequent habit of people whose correspondence is scanty, and with whom time is *not* money, she examined its exterior with a prolonged and minute investigation. The postmark was London, and the handwriting, at least so Honor conjectured, was a woman's. She had no idea, not the very slightest, from whom the big, and yet unbill-like, epistle came; and it was probably that very ignorance

which made her loth, in that presence at least, to open the envelope and set conjecture at rest.

But though reluctant, open it she was well aware she *must*. The moral pressure of two pairs of eyes—for John, I regret to say, did not prove himself on this occasion to be deficient in the so-called feminine vice of curiosity—was upon her; and therefore with a hand that trembled a little (for Mrs. John's nerves were, as I have before hinted, none of the strongest) she proceeded to open the despatch.

The first words that it contained which caught her eye was the signature, "Elizabeth Norcott," in large letters at the bottom of the page; and the sight was not calculated to make her read with greater composure the following lines:

"MY DEAR MRS. BEACHAM,—I write these few hurried lines in your father's name, and at his request; for he is, I regret to say, very far from well, and utterly unable to write himself. A severe cold, which the doctors fear has settled on his lungs, is your dear father's ailment; and it is one that makes him very low, poor fellow, indeed. It would be a great pleasure to him, and indeed to me as well, if you could make it convenient to pay us a short visit just now. Of course, if your good husband objects, we can

say no more; though I must say that *I* think Mr. Beacham owes your poor father some compensation for all he went through last year. I have engaged a very nice bedroom, clean, though small, for you, on the third floor; for I feel sure that unless detained by some of the troubles that married women have to go through, we shall have the pleasure of seeing you without delay in Stanwick-street. If you will write me the train you intend coming by, I will be at the terminus to meet you; and I beg to remain, dear Mrs. Beacham,

“Yours sincerely,

“ELIZABETH NORCOTT.

“You see I have heard everything from the Colonel. We both think it right for married people to be confidential.”

Honor's first thought, as she finished the hasty perusal of this singular epistle, was one of joy. Joy that at last, and after so long a time of weary waiting, relations with her own “family” (poor, foolish Honor!) were renewed; and the hope held out that something might come — something agreeable to herself — of the *dénouement* from which she had for a time hoped so much.

With a deep blush, for she was quite conscious of the necessity that existed of concealing this un-

wifely feeling, Honor pushed the letter across the breakfast-table to her husband.

"From Mrs. Norcott," she said, doing her best to seem occupied with her tea-making. "And she says my father is ill. O, John," she continued, setting down the teapot, and speaking almost *malgré elle*, for she had purposed choosing her opportunity better,—“O, John, mayn't I go to London? Mrs. Norcott asks me very kindly, you see, and—”

"Yes, I see," John said hurriedly; "and you'll be very glad to say yes; anything for a change! So like the women!" and he jerked his head pettishly; a sign of annoyance which Honor had learned to thoroughly comprehend.

"I shouldn't ask to go," she said, "if my father were well;" and as she spoke the sound of tears was audible in her low voice.

"He never troubled himself much about you as long as he was well," growled John. "Some people are ready enough to take anything that's offered to them, it seems to me."

He spoke crossly perhaps, for he felt sore on this especial point. He was so well convinced that the Colonel did not really feel one particle of parental love for Honor; while in his own breast, in spite of seeming harshness and of momentary fits of anger, there was such an inexhaustible well

of undying tenderness, of conjugal and yet purely unselfish devotion. Can we wonder, therefore, that he was susceptible—jealous even—when it became in the most remote degree a question between *his* claims and those of Honor's father on her love and duty? Can we wonder that he turned with instinctive repulsion from the idea of her exchanging, even for a day, the protection of his roof for that of Colonel Norcott?

Honor remained silent after John's last remark. Not that she felt in the slightest degree disposed thereby to abandon the hope which Mrs. Norcott's letter had held out. She knew John far too well not to be certain that a very little coaxing, or even the shedding of a single tear, would be sufficient to gain for her all that she required. She had only to lay her little hand upon John's stout arm, and look pleadingly with her large blue eyes into his good kindly face, and the all-important matter would be at once satisfactorily disposed of. But in the mean while, and pending a fitting opportunity for the use of her secret weapons, she kept silent even from the good words with which she intended to bring her husband over to her will.

To John Beacham, however, in his present mood of mind, his wife's taciturnity was both perplexing and vexatious. Feeling well assured that

the question of the journey to London was not by any means disposed of, he would have greatly preferred a present settlement of the difficulty, to the state of suspense which he feared would be, for some hours at least, his portion; it was therefore rather a relief than otherwise to him when Mrs. Beacham—who, to do her justice, seldom kept her fingers long out of the domestic pie—volunteered her opinion on the subject under discussion.

“In course, John, you know your own affairs best,” she said, “and I make it a rule, and always have done, which those that knows me best can certify to, not to interfere in other people’s business. But if you’ll excuse me,” and the old lady smoothed her black-silk apron with an air of dignified humility, “if you’ll excuse me, I should venture to advise that Mrs. John may be allowed to go and see her father. I may be right and I may be wrong; but if he hasn’t his health, poor gentleman, he’s to be pitied; and them that has should give way a little, and meet him half-way, instead of standing out, which isn’t, in my opinion—but then I’m an old-fashioned body—altogether right. He’s Mrs. John’s father, you know, is the Colonel, though it isn’t often the poor gentleman gets spoken of in *this* house; and blood’s thicker than water, and—”

John interrupted this harangue with a gesture

of impatience. "There, there, mother, that'll do," he said pettishly; "no need to hammer away so long on one subject. If the man that's been a brute to Honor, and to her mother before her, is to have it all his own way, why let him; and—"

How this worthy man, who with all his warmth and kindness of heart had, as we know, a quick temper of his own, might have wound up the sentence had not his words been arrested by a sudden recollection of the respect due to his womankind, is best left to the imagination. With such a disposition and nature as this right-minded man possessed, even the most trivial of offences—offences, too, of which only his own conscience was the silent witness—were almost certain to be followed by the desire for expiation. No sooner, therefore, had the wish that condign punishment might follow on the Colonel's misdeeds been suppressed, than he said in a gentler tone to Honor:

"If you think your father has any claims upon you, my dear, why then you had better write and say to Mrs. Norcott that she may expect you up in London. As mother says, sick people have to be given way to. I don't know much about bad health myself, thank God; but—No, don't thank me—settle it your own way, and if you're pleased I'm pleased;" and having so said, John went his way to his daily business on the farm.

Had any friend of stalwart hearty John Beacham's, who had known the farmer one short year before, chanced, after that period of absence, to come suddenly upon him as he took his solitary way across the home-paddock, that friend could have scarcely failed to notice the change that had taken place, not only in John's countenance, but in his walk and manner. The cares inseparable from married life had fallen, and that with no feather-weight, upon the man whose step was once so brisk and buoyant, and his smile, so frank and genial, was the index of a mind at peace with himself and in good humour with the world. He whistled as he went, not from the absence of, but from a plethora of anxious thought; for John, though he had yielded to his wife's entreaty, and to his mother's counsels (counsels which he little suspected were given with the latent object of lessening Honor's home influence), in the matter of the proposed journey, was yet very far from being satisfied with the result of the morning's deliberation. Strive as he would—and John was a man who read his Bible, and endeavoured as much as in him lay to do his duty towards his neighbours—strive as he would, he had never yet succeeded in feeling, in the most fractional degree, in charity with Colonel Frederick Norcott. A bad and baneful man he believed the father of his precious

Honor to be; and believing this, John viewed—with perhaps excusable dread—the prospect of his wife’s temporary domestication in the Colonel’s family. What but harm, he thought, could by any possibility come of this companionship with all that was vile, unprincipled, and false? That Honor could return to him the pure-minded woman he now knew her to be, John believed to be impossible; and therefore it was that, whistling as he went, the heart of the man was heavy within him. He had not proceeded beyond the length of two fields, when he fell in with one of his most trusted men, employed in carefully leading up and down a sandy lane one of the most valuable of the thoroughbred sires. A grand animal he was, large of bone and muscle, and simply perfect in his magnificent proportions. Over the well-rounded hips, the mottled skin shone and glistened in the sun’s rays, and there was both love and gratitude in the animal’s open fearless eye as he rubbed his velvet nose against his master’s outstretched hand, and neighed his answer to John’s morning greeting.

Bill Snelling looked on approvingly, and at the conclusion of the ceremony, after passing his fingers, as is the custom of his kind, over his mouth, he said respectfully, but in a tone which conveyed a good deal of latent meaning—“Maybe you’ve seen the morning paper, sir, to-day?”

There's summat they tell me in the *Advertiser* about Rough Diamond. A screw loose there, or somethink. There's never no being up to them fellows; but it would be d—d bad luck—begging your pardon, sir—so it would, if anything went wrong with the Derby favourite. If ever I saw a colt likely to win the stakes, it's that ere two-year-old, and—”

But we need not follow the irate Bill either in his enthusiastic encomiums on the favourite, or his unqualified abuse of the rascality practised by all patrons, whether gentle or simple (?), of the turf. That there was to be found, however, “*one* righteous man” in that modern Gomorrah, none knew better than the sapient Bill. He had not lived, man and boy, for more than fifteen years in “master’s stables,” without having made the discovery that the “governor” was one in a thousand. At the Paddocks there were no tricks practised. Rich horsey youths, blinded by their fondly fancied equine knowledge, were never within the precincts of John’s well-ordered establishment beguiled to their undoing. Latent unsoundness was *there* never concealed, nor incipient vice guarded as a secret. All was fair and above-board, as all the world (the knowing ones with a certain alloy of contempt) were willing to acknowledge; in the breeding-stud of trustworthy

John Beacham. Trustworthy! O, if it be indeed true that justice is so little tempered with mercy, that for every idle and involuntary thought, as well as for every evil deed, we are to be held alike accountable; if to covet be as punishable as to steal; if to look with eyes of *convitise* at our neighbour's giddy wife is tantamount to the breaking of the seventh commandment; and if to hate our brother is to be a murderer, why then I greatly fear that erring John Beacham sinned on that bright April morning one of the sins that are "to death." For, when he turned away after his short dialogue with communicative Bill Snelling, there was an added amount of hatred in his heart towards the owner of the Derby favourite. Proud as he was of his "stock," had any other man than the Colonel been the possessor of Rough Diamond, he would have rejoiced in his probable success; but, matters standing as they did, the honest man could almost have found it in his heart to *pray* that the Winner of the Great Race that year should be any horse rather than the one which Arthur Vavasour purchased some ten months previously of himself, and which that young gentleman soon afterwards, under peculiar circumstances, and without profit, disposed of to Colonel Frederick Norcott, formerly of the 26th Dragoons, and now of 14 Stanwick-street, London.

CHAPTER XVII.

HUMBLE LOVE.

WHEN blustering March was over, and the dead season of the year had been for rich, as well as poor, got through, the widow of the lamented Cecil Vavasour commenced — for the first time since his death — making preparations for a three-months' sojourn in London, or, as the newspapers expressed it, “Lady Millicent Vavasour, her family and suite, were about, during the ensuing season, to occupy the mansion in Bolton-square, to her ladyship belonging.”

In the course of the six years that Lady Millicent had passed in a seclusion which she had not attempted to render otherwise than irksome to her daughters, the above-named mansion had been let — as each revolving season came round — to the highest bidder. It was not a very dignified proceeding, and her children (her sons especially) had chafed both inwardly and outwardly against what *they* considered their mother's “dirty economy,” in thus making money out of

the family bricks and mortar. The tide of public opinion in London, as well as in the country, set strongly against the wealthy, parsimonious widow, whose accumulated riches benefited so few of the persons whom common sense, as well as the laws of nature and of precedent, pointed out as amongst those destined to reap advantage from the seed scattered by Lady Millicent's hand; while, as regarded her ladyship's sons, it was a melancholy fact, that for lack of a home, humanly speaking, those young gentlemen had in their nonage gone a good deal, as the saying is, "to the bad."

During the two years following on Cecil Vavasour's death, and while the *achievement* commemorative of that melancholy event still hung suspended between the second-floor front windows of the "noble town mansion," it was only right and proper that in the widow's house there should be no "receptions"—no sounds of merriment, no glancings of merry twinkling feet, within the silent, solid walls of Lady Millicent's deserted house. But when the years of mourning were at an end, and the "time for setting on of meat" had come—there arose by degrees a spirit of discontent against the widowed millionaire. On account of her children—this was the way that they, the aggrieved ones, put it—it was wrong, unmotherly on Lady Milli-

cent's part to hide the light of her countenance from the world. There were certain duties incumbent—as nobody would venture to deny—upon the rich, and the chief and foremost of those duties was the exercise of a genial hospitality. The good of trade too, both as regarded the expenditure of Lady Millicent's family, in London and in the country, was not a matter to be lightly regarded. The West-end shop-keepers had a right, honest tradesmen that they were, to expect that a sixth part at least of Lady Millicent's income—an income of say 60,000*l.* per annum—should find its way to their pockets. To say nothing of example—so spoke the public voice—why, what a sin and a shame it was for a lady possessed of such countless thousands, and that didn't know how either to use or abuse them, to be set in high places, only to bring disgrace upon her order, and to encourage others, who might be of similar mind, in the degrading vice of avarice.

There is one reason which, in my humble opinion, is far too seldom pleaded in excuse for the glaring faults (glaring because of the high places of the delinquents) of the great and powerful ones of the earth; and that reason is, that the said great and powerful ones find so few who are willing to speak to them of their faults, and reason with them on their shortcomings. If it

be hard—and hard we are told it is—for the rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven, surely one reason for that difficulty may be found in the comparative isolation of those who are clothed in purple and fine linen, and who fare sumptuously every day. The “divinity that doth hedge a king” is not only not without its thorns, but is very instrumental in shutting majesty off from the wholesome sympathies of life; and not alone from sympathy, but from counsel, from reproof, and in some measure from the inestimable benefits of example. That same “hedge,” too, is a dangerous deadener of *sound*. It is seldom that those possessed of rank and riches hear either the truths or falsehoods that are reported and spread abroad concerning themselves. As Kate once pertly remarked to her brother Horace, “Who *could* venture to lecture Lady Millicent upon her faults?” Poor little ill-used, thoughtless, quick-witted Kate! there were the makings of a good and useful woman in her busy brain and ardent temperament; but, under her mother’s injudicious training the little head became filled with foolish fancies, the impulses of the warm young heart seemed likely to lead its owner into something very nearly approaching to scrapes; and, in short, from the rich raw material of poor Katie’s mind there sprung the plentiful growth of weeds which

half civilisation invariably draws up from the soil.

Entirely absorbed by her own immediate plans—plans which had occupied her busy mind from the day when the contents of Lord Gillingham's will startled her into the consciousness that she must do something for herself, or a decent and obscure dowagerhood would be her only portion—absorbed, I repeat, with her own cares, to the extent of troubling herself but little with the well-being even of her children, Lady Millicent, till the day when her plans were ripe for commencement, and the hour had struck when law-proceedings, with the object of setting aside her father's will, could be entered upon, had never deemed it incumbent on her to allow her daughters more than a passing glimpse at London and its pleasures. For this seeming neglect she had her answer ready, when Lady Guernsey, or old Sir Richard Pemberton, two of the few amongst her acquaintances who ever ventured to put in a word for the young people at the Castle, suggested that a little change was good for everyone, and that both Rhoda and Kate would be probably advantaged by a moderate amount of amusement, as well as by better masters than were procurable either at Leigh or Gawthorpe.

“Young ladies in these days,” Lady Millicent

would say, "learn quite soon enough, without their parents putting themselves out of the way to teach them the lesson, that the country is a bore, and that without perpetual excitement life hangs terribly heavy on their hands. For *my* part—people may think me selfish if they like, but I honestly confess that the coming out of my girls is a ceremony which, for their sakes as well as my own, I shall be glad to put off to the latest possible period."

"But in the mean time," said their outspoken champion, "how are you preparing them, my dear Lady Millicent, for the part they are to play? I am afraid that poor dear Rhoda—(I may talk without scruple of *her*, because, as you know, I admire her so much, and have such a real affection for her)—I am sadly afraid that Rhoda, with all her beauty, will be what my boys call *nowhere*. She has not an idea, poor child, no, not the very slightest, *de se faire valoir*. Girls with less than half her good looks would make their way twice as well from the mere fact that Rhoda is simply good and shy and unaffected, and knows no more than my toy-terrier does how to make the most of herself."

That there was much truth at the bottom of Lady Guernsey's remarks, no one knew better than the mother of the gentle girl who, both by

nature and education, was so ill-qualified to fight, through the arduous campaign of a London season, the fierce battle of life. If Lady Millicent could be said to feel interest in, and affection for, any human being save herself, that human being was her unselfish, yielding, and not over-brilliant elder daughter. It would have been hard indeed for anyone living habitually with Rhoda Vavasour not to appreciate the gentleness of her disposition, and not to admire the unassuming rectitude of purpose which was one of her most striking characteristics; and yet, partly perhaps (at least so said that far-seeing Horace) because she seemed so good, no one, not even—with the exception of Lady Millicent—those of her own household, took so kindly to steady, quiet Rhoda, as they did to giddy-pated Kate—Kate, whom her brothers pronounced to be unfortunately plain, but who was one of the “jolliest” girls that you could ever hope to meet with, and who was withal as wilful, and as little inclined to do right on principle, as the less popular Rhoda was known to be the reverse.

“I wonder, and I always shall, what has made mamma make up her mighty mind to spend the season in London,” Kate remarked one morning early in March to her elder sister, as the two were taking the daily constitutional, of which

they were both in different degrees and fashions wearied, through the shrubberies of Gillingham; "everyone—Horace among the number—made so sure that this year would pass like all the rest, and that we should stick for ever at horrid old Gillingham."

"Don't call it horrid, Kate; I am sure that I shall never like any place one half so well; and when we have to leave it—"

"I for one should be ready to jump out of my very skin for joy," cried Kate, dancing forward with a kind of sidelong motion, not remarkable for gracefulness, but very suggestive of the state of mind to be expected from this young lady on the occasion of the final bidding adieu to the beautiful home of her childhood. "To think," Kate said, sobering down after her momentary ebullition of feeling, "to think that *never*—never, I mean, as a matter of rule—should we be walking here, in this same walk, between those stupid, odious trees again! O, Rhoda dear, how *can* you take everything so quietly? I do believe that if you were to be told that our going to London was over, and that we were to stay here for the rest of our lives, you would be quite contented. So long as the school went on, and you could listen to Mr. Wallingford's stupid sermons, you would never break your heart about anything."

Rhoda made no reply to this thoughtless speech. Constitutionally shy (the only one of her family who had inherited her father's life-long infirmity), this elder daughter of a wealthy house was little given to the outpouring of her inner feelings. Confidantes she had none, and so entirely undemonstrative was she of what was passing within her heart, that even her own sister had never surmised what was the *one* chief cause of Rhoda Vavasour's chronic state of contentment at dull and uneventful Gillingham.

Kate—the restless and the ambitious “Kitty,” whom her brothers plagued and petted, and who was looked on as a kind of reckless “free lance” by her unsympathising mamma—had from her earliest girlhood entertained very exalted ideas of her elder sister's beauty. There was not a tinge of womanly jealousy, not a fractional atom of the alloy of envy in Kate Vavasour's nature. She knew herself to be almost what the world calls plain; but she had good eyes, a fine *élancé* figure, and the something about her which—who can say why or wherefore?—often attracts more than beauty, be that beauty ever so exalted and refined. Of *that* class of female attractiveness was the *το καλον*—the delicate charm which one man at least who knew her discovered in the fair face of Rhoda Vavasour.

George Wallingford, the incumbent of the small and not very remunerative living of Switcham, was a scholar and a gentleman; a man possessed of no exalted intellect, no world-known name either for erudition or for race. Not even amongst the untitled wealthy—the millionocracy of this busy universe of ours—was the obscure rector of Switcham acknowledged as a unit, since it was from being one of the hardest of hard-working curates in the dirtiest and wickedest of manufacturing cities, that George Wallingford had been translated to what in his eyes was comparatively heaven—namely, to the spiritual superintendence of an orderly rural population.

As a matter of course, Lady Millicent “took notice” of the clergyman of the parish. Three times a year, or thereabouts, Mr. Wallingford was invited to dine at the Castle, in addition to which act of condescension, the young rector—whom Lady Millicent pronounced to be “very well behaved,” “really quite a respectable person”—was graciously permitted to pay his *devoirs* from time to time at the great house, on which occasions “milady” would lay down the law in parish matters after a fashion which—although he bore the trial with outward patience—could scarcely fail to rouse what was left in George Wallingford of the

old, and unregenerate man, into a somewhat unholy state of irritation.

The fact that Lady Millicent Vavasour, "civil" though she invariably was, considered him in the light of an inferior many times removed, was patent as the light of Gospel truth to the Rector of Switcham. That he did not love the lady patroness of the living he held the better for the discovery is simply adducing a proof, if proof were needed, that he was human. *L'amour ne se commande pas*, says the proverb; and the best of men—this excellent clerical gentleman included—can do no more than refrain from hating the individual who wounds their *self-love* by treating them with hauteur and condescension.

As will readily be believed, the female inhabitants of Switcham and its neighbourhood very soon after Mr. Wallingford's installation commenced their sex's normal practice, namely, that of finding a wife for a bachelor incumbent. Though the rectory of Switcham was very far removed from being one of the plums of church patronage, yet there were contingent advantages attached to it, to say nothing of the living being held, as in the present instance, by a tolerably good-looking young man a year or two under thirty, which caused more than one *demoiselle à marier* to gaze with eyes of interest on the mild-

looking clergyman in his single-breasted waistcoat and neatly-trimmed whiskers, the while the said damsel pictured to herself the lonely man eating his solitary steak; or (climax of melancholy conjuration!) brewing—in the pretty drawing-room of the parsonage—his bachelor tea!

Some years elapsed (for, as the poet hath it, “hope springs responsive in the *female* breast”) before the spinsterhood of Mr. Wallingford’s flock came to the unpleasing conclusion that the young rector was the *rara avis* among birds of his feather, a non-marrying clergyman. Even after the good man’s heart had spoken, for speak it did, when its owner had been some five years at Switcham, and when Rhoda Vavasour, emancipated from govern-ness control, was of an age to be introduced to the guests who, few and far between, were invited to partake of Lady Millicent’s grudgingly dispensed hospitality—even, as I was about to say, after George Wallingford’s seemingly obdurate heart had melted under the influence of Miss Vavasour’s shy smile and pale delicate prettiness,—the little world in which he lived knew nothing of his heart’s weakness. As how indeed should it? To no one—no not even to the friend that had ever stuck closer to him than a brother, to the school and college fellow whom hitherto he had trusted with every secret of his life, not even

to the congenial spirit dwelling like himself in a pure bachelor's body, not to the silent, caustic, woman-despising James Truscott, fellow of his college, and the most ungainly in appearance of created men, did George Wallingford confess the wondrous truth that he was in love with that bright particular star, Miss Rhoda Vavasour.

He might just as well—and it needed no stern Mentor to remind him of the fact—have set his affections upon an empress. Never even by a glance (at least not to his own knowledge) had he hinted to the object of his senseless passion, that with a dreary and a hopeless, and yet with an all-engrossing love he watched and dreamed of, sighed and prayed for her. It was intensely foolish and unmanly, the more foolish and unmanly inasmuch as the great lady of Gillingham never allowed the comparatively lowly born rector to forget his place. If kindly-natured, charitable George Wallingford did in his heart believe the well-sounding axiom that “’tis only noble to be good,” the flattering unction was not laid so soothingly to his soul as to enable him to act, as regarded pretty Rhoda Vavasour, on the cheering conviction. It may be in the abstract perfectly true that

“Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood;”

but judging of things (the only really reliable test) on their marketable value, we shall, I greatly fear, be obliged to own that, individually considered, the coronets, and the blue blood have in this wicked world the best of it.

But carefully under lock and key as the reverend George kept his secret, there was one who discovered its existence, and who, having so discovered it, was ever, with true feminine inquisitiveness, peering behind the veil of the good man's heart for further and more satisfactory information. Rhoda Vavasour's first sensation, when the fact (in some subtle and inexplainable manner) of Mr. Wallingford's hopeless passion became apparent to her, was one of actual fear. In an instant there rose up before her a vision of Lady Millicent's stern and astonished face, a face in which none of her children had ever traced a sign of tenderness, or the faintest line of sympathy or pity. It was to that very hardness, to the repellent influence felt by timid shrinking Rhoda whenever her thoughts turned to or her eyes rested on her mother's unloving countenance, that might mainly be attributed the encouragement—for she did in her silent, gentle way encourage the young clergyman to hope—which Rhoda gave to the Rector of Switcham. But there was yet another, and perhaps an equally powerful, reason

for the "underhand deceit," the "grovelling tastes," as Lady Millicent would have, and indeed did in later days describe them, that were displayed at that period of her life by her daughter. Nature had endowed poor Rhoda with a susceptible heart, and a strong propensity to cling. In default of any other object on which to fix her affections, and of some more suitable prop round which to twine, it was only in the common order of things that to the sole stay within her reach, the tendrils (heartstrings is perhaps the most appropriate word) of Rhoda's inner woman should have wound themselves round the engaging young parson, to whose exhortations, delivered in a voice singularly pleasing, she meekly listened, and who enjoyed in Lady Millicent's pet schoolroom, and sometimes by the bedside of the sick, golden opportunities of *looking*, at least, unutterable things. There could scarcely be a stronger proof of *retenue*, both on the part of the rector and that of the young lady, than the actuality that Kate, who was usually so ready at discovering love-affairs, never once suspected the truth as regarded her sister. Not even the grand phenomenon, the mighty puzzle of Rhoda's contentment at Gillingham, had sufficed to warn the rather precocious maiden that quiet, pretty Rhoda—Rhoda, who looked, as the

old saying goes, "as if butter would not melt in her mouth"—was in love with, and meekly ambitious to marry the obscure young man at whom Lady Millicent, while she deigned to patronise him, decidedly turned up her aristocratic nose.

The reason for Rhoda's silence when Kate alluded to the rector—a silence which, had Miss Kitty been in an investigating mood, that quick-witted damsel would speedily have speculated on the cause—must be now fully apparent to the reader. For a moment the shy girl thought and feared that her secret was discovered, and that, in shrinking mortification, she would be compelled to endure the wondering, kindly-meant questionings of her younger sister. The next words, however, spoken by the loquacious Kitty dissipated her alarm; and feeling intensely grateful for the reprieve, Rhoda listened with sympathising ears to the chattering girl's remarks and surmises.

"I am afraid that what Horace says is right," continued Kate, "and that it is this odious law-business which we have heard hinted at so long that takes mamma to London. One good thing is, that she cannot mean to keep us quite as much out of fun and amusement as she does here. Haven't you noticed how she has gradually been giving up the righteous dodge? For ages—as we

all know—balls were desperately wicked, and operas a positive abomination. It was only in the country that, according to mamma, there was any chance of being saved ; whereas I heard Horace say only the other day, that people could inflame themselves quite as much with idols under green trees as in the excitements of a London season. I heard him say, too—”

“O Katie,” Rhoda broke out, “don’t, pray don’t, repeat the things—I mean that kind of thing—that Horace says! I cannot bear the remarks he makes about mamma ; and I think that if you were not to encourage him, he would leave them off. And besides, I don’t know how it is, but I always feel guilty when I see mamma after we have been abusing her.”

She spoke very seriously, for little as Lady Millicent had either deserved the filial love or encouraged the confidence of her children, it nevertheless jarred against the girl’s sense of what was right and fitting when she heard the others talk, as they were wont to do, *à cœur ouvert*, of her mother’s small hypocrisies and underground plans.

Kate laughed merrily. “We abusing her! I like that! Fancy *you* saying what you think about milady! No, no ; the time for that isn’t come yet. But wait till you’re tried, that’s all. It takes longer to provoke you than it does to irri-

tate either of us. And then, if mamma is fond of anyone in the world, she is of you ; I suppose because you are so very meek, always ready to let her think she is in the right, let her do what she will. But about this muslin, Rhoda. Hammond says there certainly is not enough for both ; so I suppose, as it will not do for Miss Vavasour to look skimping before the eyes of London, you had better take the whole. Ah me !” stretching herself rather wearily as she stood before the cheval glass, and then letting her arms fall with a sigh too deep-drawn to have emanated from so young a breast ; “ah me ! how I wish I had a mother—a mother, I mean, like Lady Guernsey or Lady Pemberton, or even—don’t be shocked, you aristocratic thing !—even like Mrs. Clay. I want a motherly mother—one who would love and pet, and bore people about me—one that I could tell things to, and that would listen, and not look as if she thought one a fool. And besides—though that sounds horrid, I daresay—I should be glad of a mother who would care whether I looked nice, and who would give you, now that you are ‘coming out,’ enough of an allowance for you to dress as well as other girls. Sixty pounds a-year ! Why, Lina de Lacy had that when she was fifteen, and mamma is twice as rich as Lady Guernsey. I wonder how you *will* manage ! Run in debt, I

suppose, like Arthur. Poor Atty! But it will be worse for you than for him, if you are forced by money difficulties to marry someone that you don't love, and—"

"I shall never do that," Rhoda said, but in a voice so low that Kate could scarcely catch the words.

"So you think now; but, as I said before, wait till you are tried. And there is another thing, darling—you will have to marry for my sake. Only think, Rho dear, how happy we should be together! You with a nice home of your own, with no one to object to your ordering the carriage when you pleased, with no cross looks if you were a minute too late for prayers, with—"

Rhoda interrupted her by a laugh. "You might exchange bad for worse," she said sapiently. "All husbands are not like Lord Guernsey, and I suspect that very few homes are so happy as Sophy's was. I daresay, if we could look into the insides of many people's houses, we should see plenty of girls a good deal more to be pitied than we are. And, Katie dear, whether that be so or not, one thing is certain, namely, that it is wrong—wicked even, I think—to be discontented, and to abuse mamma. Whatever she does or says, *we* have no right to sit in judgment on, or to find fault with. Don't be put out with me for preach-

ing, dear Katie. I know I am not half so clever as you are ; but—”

“But you are fifty times as good!” cried Kate; “and I believe in my heart that because you are so good and so patient, mamma does love you a little bit ; while as for the rest of us—but what is the use of thinking about it ?” —dashing a tear impetuously from her eyes as she asked herself the painful question. “Thinking over it won’t give one affection or kindness or sympathy ; so I for one shall try to do without what would—at least so I fancy—make one contented anywhere and everywhere.”

The simple philosophy of the girl of seventeen, though in some respects rational enough, was, however, based upon very erroneous principles. The example of her more highly-valued sister might have demonstrated to her that “patience does its perfect work,” and that the most selfish of mortals, and those least to be affected by the claims of kindred and the universal prejudices of consanguinity, can yet be influenced, both as regards their conduct and their sensibilities, by the deference which real goodness never fails to obtain for those who, knowing what is right, do, as the poet adds, “always practise what they know.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

THE first sight of No. 23 Bolton-square proved rather *disenchantant* to the two young ladies, who for the last five weeks had talked and thought of but little else than the coming glories of the season. As they approached the sights and *scents* of London, a dense fog, as it appeared to the novices, but which was, in fact, simply an easterly wind laden with dull yellow smoke, shrouded as with a veil every distant object on which they looked.

“This never can be London; and London, too, in the month of May,” thought Kate, as she looked out from the window of the railway-carriage on an atmosphere thick with discoloured smoke, through the mists of which the summits of sundry towers and steeples, together with the outlines of some nearer buildings, were dimly visible.

London in the month of May! And as Miss Katharine Vavasour realised the melancholy fact, it required all the counterbalancing comfort to be

found in the recollection that Rhoda was at last “coming out,” to make amends to her for the lost country pleasures to which distance now lent a hitherto undiscovered charm. But if the time-worn, smoke-stained walls of the family mansion struck the imagination of Lady Millicent’s young daughters as gloomy and uninviting, what could be said of the interior, where the wear and tear of years was everywhere visible? In the spacious suite of drawing-rooms, the furniture of which had not been renewed for more years than Lady Millicent had ever cared to count, and where, “dingy yellow” vying with “dirty red,” everywhere displayed tokens that the letting of the town mansion of the Vavasours had been very promiscuously carried on, poor Rhoda (for Kate was too overjoyed at the change to take any lasting notice of the surroundings) stood in mute dismay. The last tenant had been an American—a wealthy New-Yorkian—who, following the “common and unclean” habits peculiar to his country, had not improved either the outward appearance or the intrinsic value, in a delicate female point of view, of the carpets. Probably Mr. John B. Foy, or whatever might have been the gentleman’s multi-fold cognomen, would have scorned the meanness of letting his house in the Fifth Avenue, or in University-square, to any Britisher or other fo-

reigner desirous to witness the humours of "York City;" but, having paid a good many almighty dollars to an individual (a "female," as the said New-Yorker might possibly have designated the superb Lady Millicent), he very naturally concluded that, viewing the matter commercially, he had a right to abuse as well as to use, in aristocratic Bolton-square, the privileges of his sex and country.

"Did you ever see anything so dirty, so shabby, so faded?" Rhoda remarked to her brother Horace, the first moment after their arrival when she found herself alone with him. "Mamma could have had no idea of how bad it was. Just look at the paint and the curtains! If they were but clean! But really, these are too horrid!"

"Wait till you make acquaintance with some of the other great houses that fine ladies give their balls and drums in!" Horace said. "It isn't everyone who finds money for everything; and you will amuse yourself just as well in a room where the paint is dingy and the hangings old-fashioned, as you have any chance of doing in places that are kept in apple-pie order. In my opinion, and as far as I can judge, it's rather *chique* to be shabby in this kind of way, as well as in some others that I could mention."

"But, Horace," said Kate, who had joined her

brother and sister, as they stood, the one philosophising and the other listening disconsolately, in the midst of the much-reprobated family furniture, —“but, Horace, tell me about Arthur. We are to call this afternoon on dear Sophy. Mamma seems terribly afraid of being over-civil; and it seems a little bit unbrotherly of Atty not to have come last night to see us, so many months as it is since he and Sophy married. But I suppose it's out of sight out of mind with them.” And Kate, laughter-loving Kate, heaved a little sigh as she quoted the well-worn proverb.

“Nonsense, it's nothing of the kind; but women are so awfully fond of jumping at conclusions. Arthur would have been here fast enough, if he had hoped that any good could come of his putting himself in Lady Mill's way; but it wouldn't, and that is a truth, poor fellow, that he has not got at this time of day to learn.”

“But, Horace dear, *do* tell me what it is all about! I should have thought that marrying Sophy Duberly would have put everything to rights. The old man seemed so very fond of Atty, and Sophy, too. I should have imagined that all would have gone smoothly with poor Arthur when once he was one of them—once he was Sophy's husband; and a baby coming besides, which Mr. Duberly was so anxious for. Really, Horace, I

am puzzled, and that is the truth. You always talk as if something dreadful was hanging over Arthur's head, and—"

"Do I? Then I am a fool for not being able to keep my own and other people's counsel. But," lowering his voice, although Rhoda, who knew herself to be less trusted by her brother than his younger sister Kate, had discreetly walked away,—"there is no use in talking about it. Have you seen—"

"But, Horace, there *may* be use in talking about it," interposed his sister. "We might do something, if we were able to put our heads together, to get Arthur out of his trouble. Union is strength, they say; and though the bundle of sticks is a pretty tough one—"

"And will therefore take time to break," put in Horace sadly, "which is precisely the reason why there is no use trying to do it; for time is everything to Atty. If you knew old Duberly as well as I do, Kate, you would say the same."

"But what has Mr. Duberly to do with it?" asked Kate.

"Everything. If anything should happen, which isn't the least likely, to old Dub, all would be smooth as velvet for Arthur; but as it is—"

"As it is! O, do go on, Horace; how provoking you are!"

“Well, as it is— But here comes milady. I say, Katie, not a word! But I needn’t repeat that to you, for, considering you are of the feebler sex, you are one of the most reliable young persons with whom I happen to be acquainted.”

CHAPTER XIX.

LE PREMIER PAS.

THE preparations for Honor's departure went on rapidly at Pear-tree House. Her wardrobe, for her station in life, was a tolerably extensive one; but besides that her stay in London was expected to be short, there was this simplifying fact as regarded the packing of Mrs. John Beacham's things — namely, that she possessed no evening dresses. Handsome silk gowns (*gownds*, Mrs. Beacham called them) she owned in plenty; but they were made high, as became a decent female to wear them, and would have been pronounced ridiculously *rococo* in a London drawing-room, where the female figure divine is displayed *à toute outrance*, and where nearly as much (anatomically speaking) may be learned of that *chef-d'œuvre* of Nature's workmanship as may be picked up in the dissecting-room or in the most *décolleté* statuary display in Europe.

Honor watched and superintended, and in-

deed aided, in the packing up of her belongings like a woman in a dream. It seemed so strange, now the time was drawing near for her to depart, that she was actually going away from John. There was such a sense of protection in his presence—the sense of trust which all women feel, and love to feel, in the support of a good and brave man—that Honor began to be very miserable at the thought of bidding good-bye to her husband. Even after they had left the house, she would have given much, as she sat by his side in the trap, to have been able to say to him that she was sorry to leave the Paddocks. Had she seen a token of softness on his countenance, she would have opened out her heart to her true friend. But there was no such sign. Stolidly, and with his eyes never turned for a single moment on the sweet face beside him, John drove along the well-known road. He little dreamt of the softened thoughts, the half-formed wishes, that were welling up in Honor's heart. He only knew that by her own wish she was about to leave him, about to leave his protection for that of the father who was so utterly unworthy of the trust. Ah, could he then but have looked into the vain foolish heart which yet, with all its vanity and folly, contained in it some elements of good, how changed might have been poor Honor's

lot, and what a chance of future peace and safety, if not of the ecstatic happiness of which simple women dream, might have been hers !

But it was not to be ! Not to be, because the wife was shy and silly, and the husband prejudiced and proud. Not to be, because fate or Providence had ordered otherwise. Not to be ? The words are terribly suggestive, and hard indeed it seems to believe, that while a poor weak woman is deliberating, it is a known fact to Him who ruleth the heart and searcheth out the spirit, that she will be lost.

John had decided not to part with his wife till he saw her safe under her father's roof. At the Leigh station, where in less time than was usually employed in the *trajet*, the pair duly arrived, Will Snelling was in waiting to drive back the horse and trap to the Paddocks.

"Walk him up and down a bit, Will," John said, as his faithful henchman gently stroked the old gray's quarters, which gave manifest tokens of hardish driving. "I fancied we were late ; clocks at the house too fast, I suppose. There, take that trunk, my man," to a porter who seemed to have nothing more interesting to do than to suck a dirty straw while he stared at the heaving flanks of John's thoroughbred steed. "Take that trunk, and look alive. The up-train's late to-day, isn't it ?"

He seemed determined not to trust himself with Honor. Like most men, especially those of a thoroughly manly stamp, he hated scenes, and the sight of a woman in even the smallest amount of grief or distress was especially annoying to him. Of what avail, besides, would it be to talk to Honor now on the only subject which contained interest for him? The die was cast. She was about to do the thing which he had thought and talked himself into believing that he most hated upon earth. His wife was to undergo the contamination of Norcott's society; to mix with his associates; to listen to the conversation of men of his stamp and strain; and to return to him—ah, *that* was the rub! *There* was where the shoe pinched most! How would Honor return to him, and to the dull country life which alone he had to offer her? Would she be less of a fine lady, as his mother (and John had begun to think, with some degree of truth) had so often called her within the last few well-remembered months? Would she smile upon him more, talk more, be more interested in her home, and—thought poor John Beacham, with a sigh, as the train rushed onward at express speed to London, would she shrink less from his touch—the touch of one who loved her, for all his lack of refinement, his red hands, and his country-made coat, with a love

which was not for an hour only, not for the brief space of a summer holiday, but for all the years that should be allotted to him upon the earth?

“Pleasant day for the end of April,” John remarked; “an east wind that cuts through you like a knife. Pin your shawl, Honor; you’d better;” and he drew up the railway-carriage window with an impatient jerk.

If they had but been alone, those two, if there had not been seated opposite to them a garrulous old woman and her maid, Honor might have said her say; John might have softened at the sight of her swollen eyelids, and all might have been well, or at least better, between them. The fellow-traveller, however, proved an effectual barrier to any such beneficial result. She did not come under the head of a strong-minded female, but was, on the contrary, one of the numerous unprotected travellers who divide their interests between their sherry-flask and the anticipation of an immediate and dreadful railway accident.

“I suppose there won’t be any signals, sir,” she said, addressing John nervously, for, as they neared London, the smoke floating on the breezeless air bore a striking and disagreeable resemblance to a November fog. “The railway people are so terribly careless. I declare, there’s no punishment too bad for them. We might all be

robbed and murdered, and not one among 'em would trouble his head about the matter."

In this way the old lady, after the fashion of her kind, maundered on, while nearer and more near to the head-quarters of dirt and smoke and crime the travellers rushed.

Honor sat mute, and with a sad and troubled countenance, by her husband's side. She dreaded and yet longed for the moment when she would be freed from the miserable restraint, the almost unendurable combat within her, which was induced by his presence. Once alone—once safe in the cab which was to convey her far from him and from the associations connected with the painful past—she would breathe, she thought, more freely, and would be better able to prepare herself for the interview with her father and her father's wife which was now so very near at hand. Honor now knew (none could have known better) that she had not done, in the spirit as well as to the letter, her duty to her husband. In thought she had strayed from him; in her daily life she had not cared to study his wishes; and above all—but that was happily, long ago now, and over—she had allowed the image of another man to stand between her and the husband who so loved and trusted her. To confess all this would have been more than Honor would have found moral strength and

courage for, so she came to a compromise, after the fashion of the cowardly, with her conscience, and made an inward resolve that on her return, at a convenient season she would—not exactly make a clean breast of it to John, but that she would show him by her conduct, ay by her words if necessary, that she repented of her past proceedings, and intended, as much as in her lay, to make ample amends for it in the time to come.

She was roused from the train of thought into which these resolutions had led her by the sudden stopping of the train, the throwing open of doors, and the inquiry for tickets. The midday was very chill and sunless, and a striking contrast to the bright May morning—twelve months, minus a day, before—when the village children strewed fresh roses in her path, and the jocund sun shone out so brightly on her bridal!

John too had been, she recollected, a very different John in those days. The companion of that vividly-remembered wedding journey would not, she felt, have hustled her out so brusquely on the platform, and would have handled her small belongings with a far gentler hand. Life, however, is compounded amongst its countless atom-like events of so many contrasts, and so many memories of contrasts, that comparisons of the present are often as unsatisfactory as they are odious.

“Non c'è maggior stupidità
Che di recordarsi del tempo passato,”

when the current of our lives is running roughly over scattered stones, and when we need our best wisdom, patience, and tact, to carry us safely through a perilous crisis.

By an insignificant, but at the same time a somewhat singular, coincidence, the family from the Castle chanced to be in the same train, and in a carriage immediately behind that in which our travellers from Peartree-house had placed themselves. The fact of their near neighbourhood was patent to John: he was, however, in no mood to listen hat in hand, and with the old-fashioned show of respect—a remnant of the not wholly extinct feudal system which had descended to him from his grandsires—whilst Lady Millicent condescendingly acted the part of suzerain lady for his benefit. Hoping to evade altogether the notice of the mighty dame, John, after the fashion mutely objected to by his wife, hustled that young person in rather unseemly haste from the carriage.

“Be quick,” he said, as he hurried her away to a cab. “Don’t look that way; her ladyship is there, with the young ladies, and I have no time for stopping if I am to go back by the next train.”

There was not a grain (as I am sure must be by this time apparent to the reader) of that very

common weakness popularly known as flunkysm in John Beacham's honest, unaspiring nature. His wife, who was not, in ordinary cases, a mean judge of character, might have felt well satisfied, could she have often chanced to be present during John's familiar interviews with men of rank and note, that subserviency was foreign to his nature, and that he was equally at his ease with the peer as with the peasant. It was only with the female sex—when that sex happened to be represented by an arrogant fine lady—that John Beacham, feeling completely out of his element, seemed awkward and constrained; so awkward and constrained that Honor, disposed to see everything *en noir* as regarded her husband's manners, rashly decided him to be vulgarly in awe of the haughty grandeur of her friend Arthur's mother. That honest John would at any time have willingly gone a mile or two out of his way to avoid a chance meeting with the great lady of Gillingham, was undoubtedly true. Want of habit—for fine ladies of any stamp came very little in his way—was quite sufficient to account for this peculiarity; but the moral cowardice betrayed by this shrinking from a subjection to Lady Millicent's queenly airs and condescending graciousness had often been a source of mortification to Honor. Since the memorable epoch of the Danescourt fête the foolish girl had

thought herself into the irrational belief that she might aspire to visit on terms of equality the upper ten thousand of the county. Before the most unfortunate discovery which had so fully developed the germs of ambition lying latent in her breast, Honor had more than once felt inclined to resent Lady Millicent's supercilious notice—her over-civil inquiries, when church was over, after Mrs. Beacham's health; and, worse than all, the occasional patronising calls at the Paddocks, when any heavy-on-hand visitors among the rare guests at the Castle chanced to express a wish for an introduction to Mr. John Beacham's far-famed breeding stud. But if such had been Mrs. John's feelings when stirred thereto partly by Mr. Vavasour's head-turning attentions, and partly by the entirely vague but pleasingly deluding surmise that she was a "lady" born, how much more was she inclined to chafe against Lady Millicent's offensive condescension when the to her blissful truth was no longer doubtful, and when Honor knew herself to be the daughter of a well-born gentleman, and the great-granddaughter (it was wonderful how soon she made herself acquainted with the family pedigree) of a baronet!

Very few words passed between John Beacham and his wife as they were rattled along the busy

thoroughfares leading from the Waterloo station to quiet Stanwick-street. A station cab is never a favourable locality for dialogue, and the fares on the present occasion appeared better pleased to be silent than to talk. Jingle, jingle went the wheels, and clatter, clatter, the ill-fitting window-frames, whilst every jerking, jolting moment brought them nearer to what would be alike a pain and a relief to both—separation!

At last—the time had seemed both long and short—the cab, leaving the northern precincts of the Park, turned into the dull, respectable little street where Honor was to find a temporary home.

“No. 14!” John shouted, with his head out of the window, and in another moment they pulled up before the Colonel’s door.

The last adieux were made—as such final farewells usually are—very hurriedly, and in a decidedly unsatisfactory fashion. It had been Honor’s settled purpose to give utterance to some kind words ere they parted—to say something—what, she knew not—that would be regretful and conciliatory; something that would make her own heart lighter when *he* should be far away. But partings, hasty partings especially, are something like death-bed repentances. There is hurry and flurry, there is alarm and confusion, there

is the consciousness of having so much to do, and so short a time in which to do it. At that moment, when poor John pressed his wife's delicate fingers with a hand moist with heat and emotion, the presence of the parlour-maid, and the duty of seeing to Honor's various belongings, checked any loving words that might have been hovering on his tongue, and almost before the object of his anxious solicitude had responded to his final "God bless you!" the vehicle, with John inside, had driven off, and Honor was left alone.

CHAPTER XX.

SILENT SORROW.

A GOOD deal to her surprise, as well as not a little to her relief, Honor was informed by the parlour-maid—who struck her, even at a cursory glance, to be rather pert and forward—that neither Colonel Norcott nor his wife were at home. Mrs. Norcott was “gone for a walk,” Miss Lydia said (she was only Polly to the gentleman lodger). Mrs. Beacham had not been expected by such an early train, and she (Lydia) *knowed*—at least, so she had heard the Colonel say—that *he* was obliged to go out on business.

Greatly reassured by this information on the score of her father’s health, Honor, who did not feel much inclined to encourage the young person’s familiarity by questioning her on the subject, entered the drawing-room, and seating herself on the comfortless-looking little sofa, covered with cheap highly glazed chintz, and stuffed with some material very antagonistic to

repose, betook herself to not-over-cheerful reflections. For the first few minutes, grief—positive and unmistakeable, at being separated from her husband—filled not only Honor's heart, but the blue eyes that looked vacantly through the confusing mist at the cheap toys and worthless ornaments with which Mrs. Norcott's work-table was crowded. Only a few short hours before, how Honor would have ridiculed the supposition that her first act under her father's roof would be—to cry! In the distance, the coming change had seemed to her a roseate opening between two parted clouds. To escape, though only for a season, from Mrs. Beacham's despotic rule—to leave behind her the monotony and the dulness, the daily routine of uninteresting duties, and the hourly reminders that her married life had been a blunder—had all in their turn been subjects of rejoicing to Honor. But above all, far and away above all, there was the near prospect that the dream of her life would be at last realised, and that she would take her rightful place amongst the ladies of the land!

It is just possible that her introduction to that delusion-expelling front drawing-room in Stanwick-street, was not without its effect in causing a reaction in this aspiring young woman's mind. Widely different, certainly, from anything that

she had previously imagined, was that small, cheaply-furnished chamber! The faded carpet, in the centre of which was spread a brown-holland abomination, called—I have reason to believe—a crumb-cloth; frail painted chairs, whose appearance alone was a wholesome warning to the unwary, that a seat *à la* Turk upon the floor would be safer than trusting to their frail support; and above all, the cottage piano, with its once rose-coloured silk front discoloured by time and exposure to the blacks and flies of a London lodging-house, formed a *tout ensemble* widely different from any which Honor's discursive imagination had hitherto called up.

For the moment the unpleasant reality produced on her mind a sobering effect, and with the natural lessening of her former desire to pay a lengthened visit in Stanwick-street, there came an increase of regret that she had allowed her husband to part from her in coldness and estrangement. It was partly—*partly*, indeed! why it was more than half—John's fault that there was disunion between them; his fault and his mother's; for who *could*—Honor asked herself, as she had done a hundred times before—who *could*, unless she were an angel born and bred, put up with the daily aggravations of Mrs. Beacham's temper?

The young wife's heart, as she sat alone upon

the hard sofa, pondering, amongst other things, on the unreliableness of the father who had, to all appearance, inveigled her to his house on false pretences, softened greatly towards her straightforward and true-hearted husband; and could she have known him better, could she have looked into the manly honest breast, and read in it all that there was of pain, remorse, and wounded pride, she must—the woman within her being, though vain and foolish, not ignobly constituted—have humbled herself before his better, higher nature, and, owning her many faults, she would have meekly prayed for leave to share his sorrows, as she had once gladly shared his joys. Such a diminishing, however, of John Beacham's vexations it would not have been easy in this case to have allowed himself. The injury that he had inflicted on Colonel Norcott had, as we are already aware, ever since its perpetration, hung very heavily on his mind; and vile as he justly judged the victim of his ungovernable passion to be, he was none the less the father of his wife; and the conviction that he was bound to make all the reparation in his power for the offence that he had committed did not tend to make John Beacham's life a happier one.

Of all things calculated to injure the temper and depress the cheerful spirit on which the com-

fort of daily life depends, there is nothing more certain to produce this deplorable result than the retention within the breast of a deep-seated and a painful secret. John Beacham was not the kind of man to talk even to his wife of the inner feelings which he was not sufficiently of a physiologist to understand. His life was one of action—a simple, above-board existence; and till that fatal blow (a blow fatal, that is, to his own peace) was struck, there had been no hidden spot, no closet within closed doors, the chance opening of which caused the man's heart within him to beat with quickened pulse, or kept him sleepless through the watches of the night. But now, alas! there did exist for his misfortune, in his hidden life, a secret—a secret the preservation of which was not precisely necessary to his reputation, and certainly not expedient for his safety; and yet John Beacham (*why*, for he was no casuist, he could not have explained) would not, for six at least of the best yearlings gaining bone and muscle in his paddocks, have had it known in Sandyshire that it was by a blow from *his* right-arm that Colonel Norcott had been so nearly sent to his last dread account; and this act of concealment—concealment, too, carried on for months—was revolting to his inborn sense of honour, and jarred against every habit of his previous life.

How far these, perhaps morbid, feelings reacted on those which he was beginning to entertain for his young wife, it would be hard to say; that they rendered him outwardly cold, and even irritable towards the woman whom he loved with such a devoted and unselfish love, was unfortunately but too true. Men of John Beacham's stamp are poor dissemblers. He was ill at ease, provoked both with himself and her, and in some way or other needs must that the discontent caused by this weight of care cropped out, and that Honor, ignorant of the cause of his *maussaderie*, attributed it to any other than the right one. Very frigid indeed and stern he often seemed, when a word or a smile from her might have dispelled the gathering clouds—might, perhaps, have caused him to forget the mortifying truth that it was *her* father who shared his mortifying secret—her father, who, though base and unprincipled, was, compared to him, a high-born gentleman, and whose well-bred air, together with the potent charm of manner (a charm which, without comprehending, John was still capable of appreciating) had descended with added grace to his neglected child.

I have dwelt perhaps too long, and returned with perhaps too much pertinacity to the causes of an estrangement which may appear to some (who are not in the habit of considering the vast power

of apparently trifling causes) as, under the circumstances, to be unnatural, if not indeed impossible. But I have wished in some degree to extenuate the faults and mistakes of my poor heroine. I have done so from a conviction that in judging others we not only see but often suspect little of the latent causes of the sins which seem to us, and which in truth are, so flagrant and so disastrous. Blessed be He who seeth into the darkest places of the hearts of his failing creatures, and who, being himself perfect, can yet find pardon and mercy for those whom erring man forgiveth not!

CHAPTER XXI.

HONOR DECEIVES HERSELF.

HONOR BEACHAM was, as I think has been pretty clearly shown, a very woman in her faults and follies—her quick impulses—her yearning for love and admiration—her small ambitions—and her dainty phantasies. “Fine by degrees, and delicately weak”—like Pope’s inferior man—this semi-Celtic woman was evidently no philosopher at all; and, left to her own guidance, the chances were terribly in favour of her coming—to use the not inexpressive nineteenth-century slang—“to grief.”

How long those exquisite blue eyes of hers would have betrayed tokens of sorrow, had they not been quickly dried by a double-knock at the door of No. 14, must ever remain a problem. To be seen with red eyelids is an act of *lèse* loveliness, which Honor would never, could she avoid it, have been guilty of committing. Her little coquettish veil, too, was ready at hand to hide any traces of past emotion that might have been visi-

ble on her countenance; so that Mrs. Norcott, who entered the room trippingly, and with the attempt at juvenile grace peculiar to that colonial lady of forty-two, saw no reason to suppose that her country guest was otherwise than cheerfully and contentedly disposed.

Mrs. Norcott, in her London walking-dress, was not a person to be passed by without attracting due notice and comment. Attired in light delicate muslin, of a pattern and make better befitting a demoiselle in her teens, the fair Elizabeth probably imagined that she looked the character to which she evidently aspired—namely, a youthful matron in the pride and glory of early wifehood. A sash, tied behind *à l'enfant*, and a small hat of the species known as *turban*, served, doubtless, in her opinion, to complete the illusion.

“How long *have* you been here?” she exclaimed, coming forward with a rush, and embracing poor Honor with the impulsiveness popularly known as gushing. “You’ll be glad to hear that the Colonel is better—really quite another person than when I wrote to you. But sit down, do. We didn’t expect you just yet. The trains must be changed, I think, or the Bradshaw, or something. But how’s your good husband? So kind of him to let you come!” And Mrs. Norcott, having established her guest by her side upon the

slippery sofa, pressed, in token of matronly sympathy, the little hand which she still retained within her own. "I am afraid," she went on to say, "that you'll think the Colonel looking ill. When I wrote to you on Monday he was terribly low, poor fellow; quite depressed, you may say, about himself. Men are such cowards, you know, when there is anything the matter with them. Brave as a lion the Colonel is before the enemy, at least so I've heard—but on a sick-bed as troublesome, and more so, I may say, than a child."

"You must have had a trying time of it, I am sure," Honor said sympathisingly. "I am not much of a nurse, I am afraid, but I will do my best; and as for sitting up at night, I am sure, though I don't look very strong, I should not mind it in the least; that is, I mean—" colouring with a recollection of Mrs. Beacham's jealous guarding over her rights—"if you and my father would like me to be with him."

Mrs. Norcott laughed—a little foolishly Honor thought.

"Why, happily for all parties unconcerned," she said, "the worst is over now, and no more nursing required for one while. As I told you just now, Honor—I must call you 'Honor,' you know—the Colonel is better—quite himself, indeed, I may say. Has gone out for the first time to-day

since his illness. I expect him back every moment. Ah ! there he is ; I know his way of shutting the hall-door by this time. He never knocks, the Colonel doesn't. Gentlemen always will have their latch-keys, you know," she added playfully (a joke, by the way, which was lost upon the young wife, who had so much in the modern Gomorrah to learn and to unlearn) ; "and the Colonel, I suspect—there are secrets in all families—has been a bit of a rake ; and—Ah, Colonel," interrupting herself as the object of her complimentary remarks threw open the door *en maître*, and strode towards the sofa ; "ah, Colonel, here you are ! And here's Honor come—looking so well ; and—"

He did not allow her to proceed, for, putting her obtruding figure with scant ceremony aside, he kissed his daughter (who had risen to greet him) with rather more than necessary warmth. The fervent salute, administered on both cheeks, brought the ever-ready crimson flush to Honor's lovely face. It was a blush that owed its being not to the demonstrativeness of the paternal embrace, but to the unexpected presence of one whose advent had never failed in days gone by to call up that often false tell-tale witness. Close behind Colonel Norcott followed Arthur Vava-sour, the man whose image still lingered in Honor

Beacham's memory—the agreeable, handsome profligate, who appeared in no way changed since in the grounds of Danescourt, she, nearly ten months before, had bidden him a not easily forgotten and rather emotional farewell.

They shook hands, and at the touch of *his*, Honor's colour deepened, and she bowed her head in very conscious shame that so it was. There are no outward evidences of internal emotion so apt to mislead, and that dangerously, as the simple and beautiful, yet alas too rare, effort of nature which is called a *blush*. It is very intelligible that so it must be. Men who, like Arthur Vavasour, live only (as they estimate living) in the light of women's smiles—men who dearly delight in discovering proofs of their own power to please—will always see in a pretty woman's heightened colour a tribute to their sure fascinations. Instinct—the instinct of self-preservation, bestowed for the protection of the weak—warned Honor, as it has warned other women before her, of the existence of this very popular delusion; and the premonition did not tend to moderate the carnation-hue that Arthur Vavasour gazed at with even more than the passionate admiration of the days gone by. Nor was his manner to her—the manner that she had always felt to be so winning—in any fashion

altered; and when he spoke, his voice was as soft, and his words as full of gentle meaning.

"I heard you were expected, Mrs. Beacham," he said, and the slow lingering pressure of his hand, sent, as he intended that it should, a thrill through Honor's delicate frame. "How long it is since we have met!"

"Very long," Honor contrived to say; and then addressing her father, she said something that was not very coherent about her pleasure in seeing him so much recovered from his recent illness.

"Well, yes, I am better," he said carelessly. "It wasn't much besides a cold; but women are so easily frightened: Mrs. Norcott thought I was going to die, I believe, when she wrote, and was glad enough when your husband—by the bye, what an uncommon good fellow he must be!—allowed you to come and nurse me. *Nurse* me? You will laugh at that. I don't look much like an invalid, do I?"

"No, indeed!" Honor said, with the pretty laugh, "restrained by gracefulness," and yet which was so thoroughly Hibernian in its character; "I didn't think, any more than John did, that you'd be up and about."

"I daresay not; but I really was most uncommonly seedy for a week or so—ask Mrs. N.

if I wasn't; fever at night, and all that kind of thing."

"Fever? I believe you!" responded his wife, who had been keeping up a not very well-sustained conversation with Arthur Vavasour; but who, like a true wife, was ready to endorse any and everything that fell from her husband's lips. "You haven't an idea how ill the Colonel has been. I declare, the day I wrote to you, Honor—I'm going to call her Honor, Colonel, from this out—I was that frightened, I didn't know which way to turn. Says I, surely his friends ought to know—and then I thought of you; says I—"

But Colonel Norcott cut short all further reminiscence by a laugh.

"It's one of my rules," he said, "and you ought to know it by this time—never to go back to anything that's disagreeable. Live and let live's my motto, and forget and forgive is another—and what's more, I practise what I preach, eh, Honor? No dwelling upon old grievances with me. I don't say that I'm exactly saint enough to turn my second cheek to the smiter; and what's more, I didn't ask your excellent husband—who's got a fist like a sledge-hammer—to knock me down a second time; but I don't bear malice all the same—not a grain of it; and I shouldn't mind—upon my word I shouldn't—shaking hands with him

to-morrow.” At this conciliatory speech Mrs. Norcott laughed heartily; Honor, on the contrary, looked very grave. There was something in her father’s words that jarred terribly against her sense of what was delicate and becoming. She had not been happy lately with her husband—he had been cold and hard, and had not seemed to understand or value her; his want of outward refinement too had often offended her taste; but for all that, she both respected his character, and had taught herself to see nothing degrading in his position. When, therefore, she heard the Colonel speak in this slightly supercilious tone of the absent John, Honor felt rather indignant at the liberty taken. It was a very different affair, allowing herself and permitting others to be disrespectful to the man to whom she owed so much; so this girl-wife, whose heart was still in the right place, listened with a countenance from which the smile was momentarily banished, to the Colonel’s half-sneering mention of her husband’s name.

She was glad—for she felt called upon to say something—when Arthur Vavasour, by asking a question connected with the Paddocks, relieved her from the embarrassment of responding to her father’s flippant sally.

“You will ride, of course, Mrs. Beacham, while you are in town,” he said; “you will enjoy it so

much, and Lady Meg would be so immensely admired. I don't think I ever saw so many fine horses, or such a number of pretty women, as there were in the Park to-day; but Lady Meg" (he had the grace not to say her mistress too) "would whip 'em all to nothing, as the Yankees say."

Again the betraying blush rose to Honor's cheek, as she explained to Arthur that there was no chance of her joining the equestrians in the Row. She had neither horse nor habit, she said, in London; and besides, John had only allowed her to come up on the plea of nursing her father; and now that he was quite well again, why—she supposed she had only to go home again.

"Nonsense! home again!" the Colonel said in his pleasant, cheerful way; "as if such things were to be allowed! Now we've got you here, young lady," and he patted his daughter's cheek affectionately, "here we mean to keep you. And if this John of yours says a word, why we'll have him up too, and give him a taste of London life, which he'll be the better of.—But I say, Arthur, where are you going to, old fellow? To dine *tête-à-tête* with the missis, eh? We're so far from civilised life in these confounded diggings, that I suppose it wouldn't pay taking pot-luck in this shanty of ours; otherwise, you're as welcome to what we've got as flowers in May."

“Thank you, I should like nothing better,” Arthur said, his eyes, which were fixed admiringly on Honor, giving ample corroboration of his words; “but there’s a great spread—an awful bore it will be—at old Duberly’s; and then we have to go to something at Lady Guernsey’s—a drum, I believe, they call it—a sort of affair where you get stewed to rags, and pressed like beef-à-la-mode, or some horrid thing of that kind, afterwards.” Of course they all laughed as they said good-bye to him. Honor was especially cheerful on the occasion. Especially cheerful, because her heart was at the moment sinking so heavily within her. Sinking from an undefined and yet miserable sense that all she saw and heard was wrong. Wrong on Colonel Norcott’s side, inasmuch as not only he, but his wife, had, as was almost clear even to Honor’s unsuspecting mind, been in league together to deceive her—wrong on her own because it was patent to herself that the deception excited in her mind neither anger nor regret.

But feeling, as she did, both depressed and frightened at her novel position, Honor summoned one of her brightest smiles to her lip as her hand lay for a moment within Arthur’s. Colonel Norcott followed him to the head of the staircase, and after a short whispered conversation, returned to the drawing-room. He looked harassed and an-

noyed; and, now that the forced smiles and pleasant look had left his face, Honor could plainly see the marks that age and care had left there.

"Gad, it's late," he said, looking at his watch; and then Mrs. Norcott, in obedience to a private signal from her husband, asked Honor if she would not like to see her room.

"It's a good way up," she said, as they mounted the steep narrow stairs peculiar to the upper flights of modern-built houses of the calibre of No. 14 Stanwick-street. "The Colonel, of course, does not attempt it; but for young legs like yours and mine it's a mere nothing."

Honor, as she toiled after this active middle-aged lady, said something civil and commonplace about London houses being necessarily different from those in the country. She was very desirous not to seem hard to please and troublesomely fastidious, but the style of architecture prevalent in Sandysshire not being of the kind to qualify for alpine climbing, she was thoroughly out of breath and exhausted on her arrival at the journey's end,—an end which, judging from appearances, was calculated to give rather a poor idea of the means possessed by the gallant Colonel and his *soi-disant* heiress wife.

The little attic which Honor was instructed to

call her room was tolerably clean ; for, as I said before, the house was one of recent construction, and the various defilements incidental to a course of habitation by a succession of fourth-story lodgers had not as yet rendered the guest-chamber of No. 14 utterly unendurable. But although even Honor—fresh as she was from God's blessed country, from farm-house cleanliness, and from the traditional scents of lavender and roses—could not have justly called that small upper chamber dirty, it was nevertheless anything but inviting to the eye. The roof was sloping and low ; the furniture mean and shabby ; there was no wardrobe, and the chest of drawers, as Honor saw at a glance, would scarcely hold even the limited supply of garments which she had brought with her to Stanwick-street.

“It is small, as you see,” remarked Mrs. Colonel Norcott deprecatingly ; “but I hope you'll be comfortable. House-rent is uncommonly dear in London in the season—and the Colonel likes to have everything comfortable—and so much expense coming on, you know.”

She spoke the last words in a kind of confidential whisper, throwing a degree of playful significance over the implied suggestion. Honor, who did not know, but who felt that there was a *dessus les cartes*, could only look with a slightly

puzzled air at her mysterious hostess; whereupon that lady, with what was intended for a pretty air of confusion, said:

“Another time, when we know each other better, being both matrons—there need be no secrets between us. Ah, I see, there is hot water—the girl of the house is generally so careless—you will come down when you are ready. The Colonel is particular about his hours: so don’t be long, there’s a dear. The Colonel always goes to his club after dinner, and you wouldn’t like to keep him waiting. Can I do anything for you? No. Well, then, I will leave you to beautify;” and so saying, Mrs. Norcott betook herself to her own, namely, the adjoining and equally unprepossessing-looking sleeping chamber.

Honor sat down on the edge of her narrow iron bedstead, and felt for the moment like one dazed. All that during the last hour had occurred was so widely different from her previous imaginings. Where was the sick-room, the wasted invalid, the atmosphere of physic-bottles and of gloom? Instead, had she not been received with chaff and cheerfulness? Was not her father in apparently perfect health? And already, simultaneously almost with her arrival, had not a visitor appeared, an intimacy with whom her conscience warned her had better be avoided, and regarding whom, as

she was well aware, her mother-in-law had already thrown out hints as uncalled for as they were offensive? And then, closely following on these mental communings, there came the more searching questions of, "What would John think of all this mean deceit? Would he not, in his indignation at the trick, instantaneously require her return?" Instantaneously? Yes! Honor felt well assured of that; John Beacham was the last man in the world to suffer patiently such a deception as had been practised upon him. He hated—of that too his wife was well aware—the man who had deceived him, with as much of rancorous feeling as he was capable of entertaining; and therefore any further sojourn on her part under her father's roof would, were John to become cognisant of the truth, have been indignantly protested against. But, on the other hand, Honor herself, though aware that she had been lured under a false presence to Stanwick-street, was by no means disposed to disclose this fact to one so deeply interested as was John in all that so nearly concerned her safety and well-being. She was conscious, on the contrary, of a very decided inclination to remain, for the present at least, where she was. Of course this inclination—the mere passing of the desire through her heart, to say nothing of the yielding to it—was wrong,

selfish, and unwifely to the most unpardonable extent. Honor, too, was well aware that she was guilty in not driving from her, at the very first onslaught, the tempter who assailed her. There was little excuse, save in the weakness of our most imperfect human nature, for the taking of this first dearly-bought step in wrong. It cost but little trouble putting that wrong foot foremost. She had but to be passive, nothing could be easier, and the affair, one might almost say, righted itself. But facile as it all had seemed, and scarcely out of the common order of things, the time came when that poor weak woman would have given all of life that remained to her, could she have, by so doing, annulled the decision of a moment, and thus averted all the terrible consequences that followed thereupon.

She would not write—so Honor, with very little hesitation, decided—to inform John Beacham that her father was well in health, and that her longer stay in London was uncalled for. It was wonderful, whilst acting thus, how many specious arguments she made use of to persuade herself that she was less guilty than she seemed. No one could imagine—so she told herself (sitting before the small painted mirror, with her fair hair hanging loosely about her neck and shoulders)—no one could by any possibility imagine that she

could be there for her own pleasure. Such a wretched room as they had given her! Room, indeed! Would anyone in his or her senses at Peartree-house have called that closet of a place by such an inappropriate name? And then her father, though his bodily health was acknowledged to be satisfactory, yet betrayed, in Honor's opinion, evident symptoms of a mind ill at ease at least, if not diseased. His pecuniary affairs, too, struck his inexperienced daughter as being in no flourishing condition. The smallness and *mesquinerie* of the house (a part of which only was occupied by her relations); the absence of a man-servant—for Honor had picked up a good deal of the knowledge of "life" from the pages of three-volume novels; to say nothing of the dress, cheap though showy, of her hostess, betrayed to Honor the fact that either money was far less plentiful in her father's than her husband's home, or that penuriousness was a vice indulged in to a large extent among her newly-found connections.

"If my father were rich and prosperous," she said to herself—and, to do her only justice, this ingenious though unconscious sophist firmly believed in the honesty of her excuses—"if my father were rich and prosperous, I should act differently, and write at once to tell John he is well. I should mind in that case less, I think, the making

him have a still worse opinion of my poor father than I know he has at present. If I could hope that John would make excuses for them, I should know better what to do; but he would be simply furious. I know that he would never have let me come, if he had not believed that my father was suffering from the effects of that horrid blow; and perhaps, after all, he *was*; and besides, if he did make the worst of his illness for the purpose of having me with him, where was the mighty harm? It only shows that my poor father loves me," added Honor, sadly, to the wilful tender little heart, which was, alas, so likely to be led astray by its own warm womanly impulses.

It was with such false reasonings as these, that Honor persuaded herself to keep the real state of things a secret, *pro tem.* at least, from her husband. He would never, she decided—even if he lived to the age of Methuselah—understand her feelings, or see things (even if she wrote to him about her father) as she saw them; and so, after sighing a little over her husband's small amount of solicitude and comprehension regarding the trifling things that so much make or mar the happiness of a young and childless woman, Honor entered on her course of deception. She was interrupted in her cogitations—cogitations which so materially affected the future happiness of one who, albeit

he wore his heart, as the saying is, on his sleeve, Honor had proved herself to be so little capable of comprehending—by a hasty knock from the “girl of the house”—the “young person,” whose back hair was thrust into a greasy net, and whose upper woman was clothed in a red Garibaldi that had evidently seen service, which warned the visitor from the country that by indulging herself in reflection, she was doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Dinner was “on table,” as the parlour-maid (to whom Colonel Fred was in the habit of saying civil things) with no great show of respect informed her; and Honor, in some trepidation—for she did not feel exactly at home in her father’s house—hastily put the finishing touches to her simple toilette, and hurriedly, two steps at a time, in very unmatronly fashion, descended the many flights of stairs to the drawing-room. Colonel Norcott was standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fireless grate, when his daughter entered with an apology on her lips, and a pretty deprecating smile lighting up her face. Mrs. Norcott had already taken her seat at the round table, which had been cleared for dinner, and was gazing with large anxious eyes, anticipative of evil, on the pewter dish-cover, not one of the brightest specimens of its kind, that graced the simple board.

"I am so sorry," Honor was beginning; "I had my trunk to unpack; and my hair was so tumbled that I was obliged to undo it, and—"

"And you couldn't have been quicker if you'd done it for a bet," said the Colonel good humouredly. "So now for the miserable meal we call dinner. You'll wish yourself back at the farmhouse, I suspect, when you taste the nastiness that Mrs. Thingummy treats us with. You get rather different grub at home—eh, Miss Honor?"

His daughter laughed lightly as she took her place beside him. It amused her greatly to be called "Miss Honor," just as if she were a girl. And then he looked at, and spoke so kindly to her that she was already beginning to feel at home in the Stanwick-street lodging. With the large-boned, youthfully-dressed matron, dispensing with an air that was intended to be genteel, the ill-dressed, London-flavoured whiting from the scantily-filled dish before her, Honor did not expect to feel much kindred sympathy. Mrs. Norcott was, however, to judge from external appearances at least, good-natured, and *facile à vivre*. If she had ever enjoyed the prestige of being that often self-reliant and arrogant character yclept an heiress (a fact of the truth of which Honor began to doubt), there had as yet cropped out no signs either of a love of domination or a purse-proud

spirit. A harmless vanity, joined to a blind worship for the Colonel, had hitherto struck Honor as the most distinguishing feature in the Australian lady's idiosyncrasy.

"If you can eat that stuff it's more than I can," said the master of the house, pushing away his plate with disgust. "You see, my dear child, what it is to have a father who hasn't one shilling to rub against another. I—"

"Now, Colonel, I am surprised to hear you talk in this way," put in his wife. "There are a precious good many shillings in three hundred pounds a-year, or I am a good deal more out in my arithmetic than I think I am. The idea of talking in this way before your daughter! Why, she'll think she's come among beggars, to hear the way you're going on."

Fred laughed sardonically. "Not much need to talk about it, I think. Those horrible whittings fried in black grease render all further explanation on the subject nugatory. I don't suppose that any affectation of superfluity is likely to deceive Mrs. Beacham; and, in my opinion, it is always better to be plain-spoken. You've got a poor devil of a father, my dear child, who finds it hard enough, I can assure you, to make both ends meet. Of course you will be uncomfortable here, I expect *that*; but I do flatter myself that you won't

throw me over, Honor, because I'm a poor man. I've trusted in women all my life, and never had cause to repent it yet; so here's your health, my dear, and may you enjoy health and wealth and happiness long after your poor old father has been laid under the sod."

He had taken advantage of Lydia's momentary absence to utter this pathetic speech, and as the red Garibaldi was not there to mar by force of contrast the Colonel's paternal platitudes, he got through his toast swimmingly. In another moment, and before Honor's hand, which had been lovingly extended to meet her father's, could be withdrawn, the parlour-maid, in whose roguish black eyes the "first-floor front" was certainly no hero, had bounced back into the room, bearing before her a large specimen of that economical and succulent dish known to housekeepers as a juicy leg of mutton. Nothing overcome at the sight of this delicacy, Mrs. Norcott pressed a slice, cut with the gravy in, on Honor's acceptance.

"What, not a mouthful? Dear me now, how sorry I am! Is there nothing we could tempt you with? It's because the mutton's raw, perhaps, that your stomach turns a little at it. Lydia, can you get nothing from the larder for Mrs. John Beacham? That knuckle of ham, now—"

Miss Lydia grinned broadly. "You'll never see that there mouthful of 'am again, 'm," she said pertly, and after the fashion of one accustomed to speak her mind. "The Kunnle he ate *that* for his breakfast this morning afore he went out ;" and having so said, she went on briskly with the important duties of her calling.

To Honor, accustomed as she was to "the land flowing with milk and honey" of the old farm-house at Updown Paddocks, the state of the Stanwick-street larder appeared a most deplorable affair indeed. As for her father—her high-bred, distinguished-looking father, with his delicate aristocratic hands, his dainty golden sleeve-buttons, and, in her opinion, his warm paternal heart—she could hardly refrain from tears as she looked upon his futile efforts to eat the nauseous food that was set before him. She had not been reared, as we know, in the school of over-refinement, and to do violence to her own feelings in order to spare the self-love of another was one of the consequences on an advanced state of civilisation which had not, as yet, made itself felt in the somewhat *arrière* parish of Switcham. To feign an appetite if she had it not was not therefore amongst the small deceptions which Mrs. Beacham felt called upon to practise, and for that reason the poor girl rose dinnerless, or, as she would in her ignorance have called it, supper-

less, from that untempting board. No sooner had the energetic Lydia retired, closing the door upon all (save its unwelcome perfume) that remained of that highly-unsatisfactory repast, than Colonel Norcott, taking his hat from a side table, announced his intention of going out.

"Only for an hour or so—just to smoke a cigar in the open," he said carelessly. "You'll be in bed though, Honor, I suppose, before I come back? Beauty-sleep, eh? We mustn't lose those country roses sooner than we can help, or we shall have John looking us up with that stout stick of his. Gad, how quick he struck, and how it tingled! I can feel it now;" passing his hand playfully over his forehead. "Took one so deucedly by surprise, you know. Hadn't an idea, of course, that he was going to do anything of the kind. Nothing but a light cane in my hand, talking quietly about old times, when, without a word, down comes the sledge-hammer, and, by Jove! I *was* floored."

"He was very sorry afterwards, indeed he was," Honor said pleadingly. "I have heard him say so often. He hardly knew what he did. If he had not been sorry, he would never have let me leave the Paddocks to-day."

"Wouldn't he?" chucking her under the chin. "Looks sharp after his pretty wife, eh? But as

to being sorry, I can believe as much of that as I like. If he had been, he would have answered a letter that I wrote to him some time ago about Rough Diamond; but as he didn't," and a very vindictive expression flitted across his bearded face, "I know what to think, and, what is more, shall probably act upon the conviction I have come to."

Honor could only *look* her surprise at this wholly unexpected outburst. Before, however, she could utter a syllable in extenuation of her husband's sin against politeness, Colonel Norcott had taken his departure, leaving her to spend the hours till welcome bedtime came in listening to the uncongenial gossip of the woman whose society was by himself so evidently unprized. Honor's first experience of genteel life in London was certainly neither an amusing nor an instructive one.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TURNING OF THE HEAD.

“How pretty Rhoda is looking! Arthur, I am sure, in spite of what you say, that she *will* make a sensation in London. Her features are so regular, and her complexion, though she *is* pale, is so wonderfully clear and pure. Besides she looks so good, so—”

“She had better look *bad*,” growled old Mr. Duberly, in response to his daughter’s sisterly remarks on the personal recommendations of the *debutante* from Sandyshire. “She had far better look as wicked as the evil one himself if she wants to nobble the young Lunnon gents. A gell who ‘looks good’ has no more chance of what you call getting on there than my Soph,” and he winked at his daughter facetiously, “would have had, if she hadn’t happened to have a few thousand pounds in her pocket, poor gell! There’s that Lady Fy, as they call her, with her dead eyes and painted hair; I wonder where *she* would be if

looking good was the order of the day, and if whalebone didn't make the woman, and—"

"And want of it the *stick*," laughed Arthur. "But you are quite right, sir, and Sophy is making a great mistake about Rhoda; she won't have a chance in London. The ugliest girl going, if she were only chaffy and got herself up well, would cut her out at once, knock her into smithereens, if she set about having a try with poor Rhoda. And then the *entourage*, the home, I mean"—explaining the foreign word for the benefit of his father-in-law, who understood about as much of the French language as he did of that of the twelve tribes—"the home in which my unfortunate sisters live is the last one in the world to tempt a man to commit matrimony in their behalf. In my opinion there is nothing like a jolly, genial mamma—the kind of mamma exactly that milady is *not*—for getting girls well married. By the bye, Sophy, my child—now don't agitate yourself, or we may have to send prematurely for Mrs. Gamp—Lady Mill intends doing you the honour of calling here, and—"

"O, Arthur, don't say so! How horrid! I would so much rather go *there*. It is so much nicer to be able to go away when one has had enough—when one has nothing more to say, I mean, and—and I know I shall hate it so."

Old Dub, who formed a component part, and

a greatly valued one by his daughter, of Arthur Vavasour's family, had left the room the moment that the conversation turned, which it often did, on Lady Millicent and her shortcomings. The good old man, conscious of harbouring (a very unwelcome guest) in his inner man a decidedly unchristian dislike to the lady in question, abstained, as far as lay in his power, from the gratification—for such it undoubtedly was—of hearing her abused and ridiculed. His sense of honour, too, which was singularly keen, revolted from any secret attacks, any stabs in the dark, any—even the most well deserved—accusations, when the individual so accused was, from absence or ignorance, deprived not only of the opportunity of self-justification, but of bringing *en evidence* the “other side of the question.”

“You’ll be so good, Master Arthur,” he had once remarked, and that in his most decided manner, to his thoughtless son-in-law, “as not to say anything in my presence about your mother which you wouldn’t say before her face. I don’t pretend to much liking for milady, nor do I suppose there’s much love lost between us. She thinks me an old snob (isn’t that your new word for fogeyism?) and I—well, it don’t much matter what *I* think. I’m an old fellow, and an old-fashioned fellow, and in *my* time—don’t laugh, you rogue—young men

and women honoured their fathers and mothers in a way they don't seem to do nowadays. You may say that the parents don't always deserve to be respected; but that's neither here nor there, and God A'mighty said nothing about that," added the old man reverently, "when He gave the two tables of the law to Moses. One of these days, my boy," and he laid his hand kindly upon Arthur's shoulder, "you'll be glad if your own sons have been brought up in my way of thinking. In the mean time, remember that it's a bargain between us that you are to be mum in my presence about my Lady Mill."

But we must return to Mrs. Arthur Vavasour, and to her anything but joyful anticipations as regarded the expected visit of her uncongenial mother-in-law.

"O Arthur, what shall I do? I could bear anything better than a formal call from Lady Millicent. What am I to say to her? She has such a dreadfully cold way of looking into and at one. She shows so plainly that she despises papa and me. I don't mind it so much for myself, for of course I know that you might have married anybody; but it does vex me when she behaves so about poor papa. I know he feels it, though he says nothing. Papa is so odd, dear old man, about some things; he is so chivalrous, so innately

courtly, like the old knights. Don't laugh, Arthur; I know he does not look much like them, with his round face and dear bald head; but I think, I do indeed, that they, when they fought for their ladies, must have felt something like my poor father. He places woman so high. I can remember how courteous and tender—though I daresay Lady Millicent thinks him vulgar—he always was to poor mamma. He has a horror of fast girls; they are the only creatures in the shape of women that I ever hear him severe upon; but he would love Rhoda dearly. O Arthur, how nice it would be if we could see a good deal of her! But of course Lady Millicent would never allow that; she would think her daughter would be contaminated by living with such vulgarians as papa and me.”

Arthur during this plaintive speech had been standing with his back to the speaker, tapping impatiently on the plate-glass window-pane, having a view upon the now tolerably crowded park, for it was five o'clock, and Mr. Duberly's grand town mansion was one of the finest in Hyde-park-gardens. He turned round hastily at the cessation of his wife's voice, and said a little impatiently:

“How silly you are, dear, to vex yourself in this way! Because my mother happens to be a vulgar fine lady—and believe me, Sophy pet, that no genuine lady (the kind of lady that your

friends the knights worshipped), is ever rude—because my mother happens not to know how to behave herself, it behoves you to give her a lesson.”

“Give her a lesson ! Me !” exclaimed Sophy, in amazement.

“Yes, *you* ! Why not ? Only be your own dear, merry, unaffected self, only show that you, tremendous heiress that you are (and which I never can get you to remember), are not to be put down and tyrannised over and browbeaten, and, believe me, Lady Millicent, like all bullies, will draw in her horns, and treat you with the respect that is your due.”

“I don’t want respect,” sighed Sophy ; “all I long for is affection. I should so like your mother to love me, Arthur. Just now, too,” and she blushed prettily, “I feel more than ever reminded that I have no mother of my own.”

“And no great loss, either, if all mothers are like the only one that I have any experience of,” said Arthur lightly, while endeavouring to divert his wife’s thoughts into a more lively channel. “But, Sophy darling, if it bores you too much, you sha’n’t see milady. There is no positive necessity for it. I can easily say that Williams has ordered you to be quiet, and” (as he settled the cushion behind her shoulders, for Sophy was delicate, and both liked and required attention)

“if you like it, I will stay and protect you, read to you, do what you like, dear, as your cold is to keep you at home this disagreeable day.”

But to this sacrifice, for sacrifice she well knew it was, on her husband's part, Sophy would not listen. He was the very best, the kindest, and the dearest, so, with grateful tears and smiles, she told him, of created beings. The idea of his giving up his ride for her! Who but himself would have dreamt of such an act of self-devotion? As regarded Lady Millicent's visit, too, it was so very thoughtful, so nice of him to let her off. But Sophy could be self-sacrificing as well as he; so, though she felt weak and languid, she assured her hero that there was no necessity for either care or quiet, that she felt quite equal to the threatened visitation, and intended on that very day, provided that Lady Mill kept her promise of calling, to practise Arthur's lesson on behaviour

A bright happy smile lighted up her face as Arthur, kissing her forehead lightly, said a few farewell words. Nor did the look of placid contentment fade away even after the music of his foot upon the stair had ceased to echo in her ears; for the young wife was wonderfully happy—as happy, perhaps, as it is ever given to mortal woman here below to feel. Assured of her husband's

affection, and adoring him with all the force of her warm young heart; with not a wish ungratified, and endowed with health and spirits to enjoy the good gifts that were with such a lavish hand bestowed upon her; blest with a kind father's doting tenderness, and dreaming as she lay on her luxuriant couch of the "prime of bliss" in a few weeks to be accorded to her prayers, who can wonder that Arthur Vavasour's wife was one of the happiest of her sex?

And he, the man who was so seldom absent from her thoughts, the husband, to obey whose slightest wish was felt by the unselfish Sophy to be a blessed privilege which all must envy her, did he, as he strode forth hastily, for he had an appointment and was late, feel no remorseful pang for wandering thoughts, and dreams on joys forbidden? I fear that to this query I must answer in the negative. It is not in the earliest stages of our cherished sins that the avenging demon of unavailing regret rises up before us, and embitters joys that else were sweet. Sin, the very wickedness that is destined to be our ruin and shame, assumes at the beginning such very fair and false proportions. In early sunlight the shadows are so short, the path before so bright, the glare so dazzling and the day so long. It is when the shadows lengthen, and the night approaches,

when the sin which in the distance looked so unlike crime stands revealed a hideous skeleton, bereft of all its false adornments, in our walk by day and in our couch by night, that we look back to the past with misery and vain remorse, asking ourselves the bitter, futile question whether the gain is worthy of the cost, while like withered leaves in the sad autumn time,

“The hopes of our youth fall thick in the blast,
And the days are dark and dreary.”

Arthur Vavasour, although he might not be exactly in that blissful condition which has been described as having “nothing on one’s mind,” was nevertheless quite sufficiently light-hearted as he wended his way that spring afternoon in the direction of Stanwick-street, to make all things around and about him seem wonderfully bright and hopeful. The “tropic time of youth,” the possession of life’s choicest gifts—health, wealth, and beauty—were enough in themselves to account for the “gleams elysian” that lighted up this young man’s path while, treading as though it were air the Tyburnian pavement, he wended his way to the presence of his peerless Honor. His!—for already he had begun to arrogate to himself the monopoly of his neighbour’s wife. The monopoly, that is to say, of her time, her

thoughts, her *liking*. Already there could, it is to be feared, be little doubt of the melancholy fact, that the affection and fidelity of his own wife would, in comparison with that of honest John's, have been but little prized. Of the one he was assured, while over the other hung just enough of the delightful veil woven of hope and imagination to lend enchantment to the prospect which his own unrestrained passions, aided by the machinations of one of the vilest of human beings, held up before him.

To the motives as well as to the plottings of Honor's unprincipled father, the infatuated young man resolutely closed his eyes. He could scarcely fail to see that Colonel Norcott was ready to promote and encourage his intimacy with John Beacham's wife, and under any other circumstances Arthur would have turned aside with disgust and horror from conduct so vile and so unprincipled. But we are very apt (and Vavasour was no exception to the rule) to condone the sin by which we hope to profit; and there were besides other reasons, although I must not anticipate, which would assist in accounting to the reader for the readiness with which the young heir of Gillingham fell into the plans and projects of the almost universally "held cheap" sporting-man.

On this occasion, the occasion of his ostensible visit to the master of the house, he found, as he expected, Honor Beacham alone. That *she* was agitated by his appearance both her words and the pretty confusion which she was far too untutored to disguise, betrayed; and that Arthur, forgetful of his young wife at home—forgetful of old ties of friendship, and utterly careless of consequences as regarded the guileless wife whose peace he was undermining—made the best of the passing hours allowed him by the prudential arrangements of the unprincipled Fred, who that knows anything of the worst side of human nature can doubt?

Before Arthur Vavasour took his leave he had thoroughly succeeded in awakening in Honor Beacham's ambitious and pleasure-loving breast a keen desire to partake of such gaieties and amusements as he might be able to procure for her. On the following morning a riding-habit, borrowed from the wardrobe of the unsuspecting Sophy, was to be altered (if necessary) for Mrs. Beacham's use; a box at the Opera was to be placed at her disposal, and everything worth either seeing or doing was to be seen and done by the pretty recluse of Updown Paddocks. Honor knew that it was all wrong; but her head was beginning to be turned, and that night as she laid it on her

pillow she almost went the length of congratulating herself that she had kept the unsophisticated John in the dark regarding her father's health. She had every chance of catching a glimpse of the ineffable delights of London in the season, as those delights were imagined in her foolish dreams, and coloured by the man whose words had from the first moment of her acquaintance with him possessed such a strange and unfortunate influence over her still childish mind.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RECTOR COMMITS HIMSELF.

ARTHUR was not far wrong when he averred that his sister Rhoda was the last girl in the world to make a successful *début* in London society. Shyness—being entirely uncomprehended and believed in—is too often there mistaken for stupidity, or, at best, for a disinclination to be pleased and to be “jolly.” Looking beneath the surface is too long a process for the superficial observers of the present day; summary condemnation takes little time, and lynch-law, in the shape of something very like ostracism, is speedily pronounced. So Rhoda Vavasour—whose mother had been guilty of that terrible social blunder, namely, the non-keeping up of her connections—found herself, although rather pretty and decidedly “nice,” quite thrown away in the West-end world. Under these circumstances, and feeling—gentle though she was, and humble-minded—a little mortified and *délais-sée*, Rhoda’s heart naturally turned again towards

the man who, being but a country rector, looked up to, loved, and appreciated her. For her—almost partnerless, and left, whether at ball, opera, or party, a good deal to her own resources and reflections—the memory of George Wallingford, together with her pleasant country duties and avocations, was as a gleam of summer sunshine, a green oasis in the peopled desert of her uncongenial life. When, before her departure from Gillingham, the rector, meeting her by chance as she was leaving the door of a poor dependent on her kindness, stopped his horse, and by a few meaning words, and looks more suggestive still, conveyed to her the knowledge that neither time nor absence would erase her image from his heart, he of course committed this disloyal act with eyes wide open to its impropriety. He knew, ay better than did Arthur Vavasour, that he was, in thus secretly tampering with a young girl's affections, committing a sin against his neighbour. That sin might not, viewed abstractedly, be so heinous as that which Rhoda's brother was, with equal audacity, committing; but in reality the one man's guilt was little inferior to the other; both yielded to such temptation as was within their reach, and the consequence in either case was the punishment that had been so deservedly incurred.

Lady Millicent, whose motives for passing the

season in London could scarcely be called motherly ones, troubled herself little about her elder daughter's pallid cheeks and languid movements.

"Rhoda was always *pasty*," was her answer to Lady Guernsey, when that kind friend endeavoured to draw her attention to the small amount of interest taken by the *débutante* in the amusements that were offered to her; "Rhoda never had more colour than a boiled fowl. And in London I don't see how she is to get rosier; unless, indeed," correcting herself a little spitefully, "she were to employ the same tricks that other girls do; and *that*, I need not tell you, is not in Rhoda's line."

"I cannot help fancying," Lady Guernsey said after a pause, during which she was wondering a little nervously how her hint would be taken,—"I cannot help fancying that Rhoda may have taken a fancy, may have seen someone who—"

Lady Millicent drew herself up indignantly. "I should have imagined," she said, "that you had seen enough of Rhoda, enough too of my mode of bringing up, to render such a surmise—ahem—impossible. My daughter has never left my roof but once; and that, my dear Lady Guernsey, was when you kindly invited her to Gawthorpe. I should be distressed to think that while with you, and under Lord Guernsey's protection, she should

have met with anyone who, I mean—pray allow me to proceed—anyone who had clandestinely gained her affections, and thus put a bar—for I could not tolerate anything underhand—to my receiving him as a son-in-law.”

Lady Guernsey could not restrain a smile at this indignant outburst against one who was in point of fact a myth. Preparing to rise from the sofa, on which the two chaperones had taken refuge from the crowd and heat of a “delightful” ball, she said courteously:

“You must forgive me for my guess, and believe that nothing but our deep interest in dear Rhoda could have called it forth. As to her having seen anyone in the shape of a lover at Gawthorpe, that, I can assure you, was out of the question. Anything more dull than we were last Christmas, you would hardly believe. The death of poor Guernsey’s sister made gaiety out of the question; but the children, all things considered, seemed to enjoy themselves; and I am only grieved to see your girl looking so dull and altered.”

She put out her hand to her country neighbour as she spoke, and Lady Millicent, whose thoughts had already wandered away to law-courts, will-cases, and appeals, returned her good-night with apparent cordiality.

Meanwhile—for absence, as is universally acknowledged, is apt to increase *les grandes passions*, while it has a directly contrary effect upon minor ones — meanwhile the rector of Switcham, in that pretty but dull study of his, sat ruminating, sometimes by the hour together, on the perfections of Rhoda Vavasour; on their mutual attachment (for George Wallingford felt as assured of the young girl's love as if she had told him the sweet truth in words), and on the maddening possibility that in London, in the midst of the gay and exciting scenes of which he had heard and read so much, some man less faint of heart or more attractive than himself, might step between him and his love, and thus deprive him of all that made life dear and valuable. The idea that such *might*, by some terrible contingency, be the case, was, as I have just said, very distracting to the rector; so distracting, that his usually well-balanced mind tottered a little on its throne, and the judgments and resolves—so calm habitually, and prudent — of sensible George Wallingford, gave token of the emotion that was going on within his breast.

That it would be an act little short of insanity to request of Lady Millicent Vavasour the hand of her daughter in marriage, Rhoda's clerical lover would, no later than three days before, have been

quite willing to acknowledge ; but, whether it is true that *quos Deus vult perdere prius dementat*, or that the *man* as well as “the woman who deliberates is lost,” it is needless to inquire, the fact remaining the same—namely, that poor George Wallingford, believing his position could not be worse, and might by some strange freak of Fortune be bettered by his desperate act, arrived at the somewhat rash resolution of proposing himself to Lady Millicent Vavasour as the future husband of her daughter.

The determination was no sooner arrived at than it was acted upon. Alone with his own thoughts, his own fears, and the hopes which the last tender smile which he had seen on Rhoda’s quivering lip had raised within his heart, the unfortunate young rector, unable to endure suspense, rushed madly to his fate. Alas for him, poor fellow!—where was at that crisis of his life the outspoken, sensible, hard-headed college friend, who with a strong grip—painful, perhaps, but salutary—would have plucked him from the edge of the abyss, and with a “Don’t make a fool of yourself, old fellow!” would have given wholesome counsel, and have staved off much of the unhappiness soon to be recorded?

The letter on which—as he touchingly explained to the *sympathising* Lady Millicent—the

happiness of his future life depended was written just four days after the departure of the Castle family for London. Under what circumstances it was received, how Lady Millicent behaved on its perusal, and the consequences resulting from its perpetration, will form subject-matter for another chapter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FAST DOWNHILL.

HONOR'S first letter to her husband—which she despatched the day but one after she left the Paddocks—was not written without a considerable amount of thought and caution. It was not in this young creature's nature to be false. On the contrary, deceit hung like a chain of lead upon her mind—a chain that was heavy and galling, and which, save when she was diverted from the pain it caused her by the excitement of dissipation, of Arthur Vavasour's society, and, alas, by the admiration of which this true daughter of Eve well knew herself to be the object, Honor's consciousness of her own disloyalty caused her to feel very thoroughly unhappy and remorseful. Her letter to John—the first which she had ever addressed to him—caused her even while she wrote it to blush for shame. In it—while she carefully avoided, or rather ingeniously glossed over, the subject of her father's illness—any acute observer

might have perceived that she was in no hurry to return to Sandysire. She had found the Colonel better, she wrote; but he was looking ill, and complained a good deal of his head. (This, in Honor's defence, I may remark, was no invention on her part.) Altogether, she felt she was a comfort to her father. He was in very different circumstances from what she (Honor) had imagined him to be. Really quite poor, she almost thought. They had no house, only a small lodging, and they lived very poorly—so poorly that Honor was quite sure John would not like it at all; while as for mother she would not be able to exist on the kind of food that was served up in Stanwick-street. As regarded herself, she was—though she could bear it very well for a time—extremely uncomfortable. A little attic at the very top of the house!—an attic with a sloping roof, and no closet to hang her dresses in, and—But there is no occasion to follow Mrs. John in her filling up of this her first letter with diatribes against her own discomfort, and with comparisons (flattering, as she hoped, to the old lady's pride) between the wretchedness of the furniture and the poverty-stricken nature of the food in Stanwick-street, and the luxuries and comforts which she, the writer, had enjoyed at home. She wound up her letter (a missive in which she

had carefully abstained from any allusion to the amusements, both present and to come, which were in readiness for her delectation) with a hope that her father's health would continue to improve; in which case, in a fortnight or ten days, perhaps, Colonel Norcott would let her talk of returning to the Paddocks. Both he and his wife showed her so much kindness and affection that, however much she would like to be at home again, she could not think just at present of speaking about her return.

This was the sum and substance of Honor's letter to her husband, and now that it has been very frankly laid before the reader, I greatly fear that his opinion of my poor heroine will not be much raised thereby. Little enough have I to say in her excuse. She was very human, very womanly; with the seeds of corruption in her veins, the child of a weak mother and a wicked father, her infant innocence unshielded by a prayer, the silent nursery work, the holy secret duties which are a mother's province, and hers only to perform, perforce left undone—how can we wonder then that this child of nature, abandoned to the care of hirelings, and so early transplanted to a soil in many respects uncongenial, should prove herself to be no better than hundreds upon hundreds of her sex and age, who, giving up reality

for things hoped for, find to their cost that their foolish discontent has proved their deadliest bane!

“Well, John, and what is the letter about? She seems to have written plenty, any way; but I suppose you won’t care to tell *me* what all that heap of writing is about;” and Mrs. Beacham, who, as was usual with her at letter-delivery time, was busily employed in the housewifely and popular task of concocting strong tea from a not over liberal allowance of the herb, endeavoured to look as if she were not in the slightest degree interested in the queries to which she had just given voice.

John, who had just finished his letter, and was proceeding to read it a second time, in order to render himself thoroughly master of its somewhat puzzling contents, pushed the delicate and young-lady-like looking epistle across the table with rather an impatient gesture.

“I don’t know that you’ll be able to make much more of a hand of it than I can,” he said gruffly, for his heart felt terribly sore, and with men of John Beacham’s stamp emotion does not manifest itself in an especially tender fashion. “The man hasn’t much the matter with him, as far as I can understand; never had, I daresay,” he added under his breath, but his mother caught the words, and treasured them in her mind for future use.

“It ain’t much good,” she said quietly, “giving me the letter now. I couldn’t read a word of such fiddling writing as that without my specs. After breakfast, my dear, I’ll see what *I* can make of it. So the Colonel’s all right again, is he? Well, well, I never thought, for one, that there was much cause for fear; but Honor, she was so wild to go, there was no use trying to stop her. I declare to goodness—I never said so before, John, for what was the use? it would only have worried you—but I declare to goodness, she was like as if she didn’t know whether her head or her heels was uppermost, when she was packing up. Glad of a change, I suppose, like all young people. It’s only nat’ral she should get tired—such a young thing as she is—of the Paddocks—not nineteen yet; and you—though you don’t look it, that I must say—nearly old enough to be her father. As for me,” rising leisurely from her chair, for her morning task was over, and the “specs,” needed for the persual of her daughter-in-law’s letter, were to be searched for on the adjacent work-table,—“as for me, in course your wife’s glad enough to get out of *my* sight and hearing. An old body like me, do what she will, is sure to find herself in the way; and I *have* found myself in the way, I don’t deny it, John, though it ain’t a pleasant thing to say, least of all to you, my

dear." And Mrs. Beacham, after this pleasant exordium, donned her tortoiseshell spectacles, and commenced what seemed likely to prove no easy task, namely, the deciphering of Honor's flowing but not over-legible caligraphy.

To describe John's feelings during the long-drawn-out operation would be impossible. Already deeply hurt and wounded by the mere passing thought (for his nature was too excellent for the spontaneous breeding therein of harsh suspicions or dark surmises of evil) that he might have been the dupe of Colonel Norcott's (not his wife's—*that* conjecture was reserved for Mrs. Beacham's less indulgent breast to harbour) underhand designs, his mother's preamble—*surgit amari aliquid*—together with her running comments on poor Honor's rather confused and disconnected letter, tried both his feelings and his temper severely.

"Well, mother," he said at last, his patience giving way as much under his own troubled thoughts as his mother's covert hints and very unpleasant guesses; "well, mother, if you talk till doomsday you won't make things different from what they are. It's as plain to me as it is to you that Honor wants to stay in London with her father. God knows that I'd be glad enough to think it wasn't so; but it is, and there's an end of it."

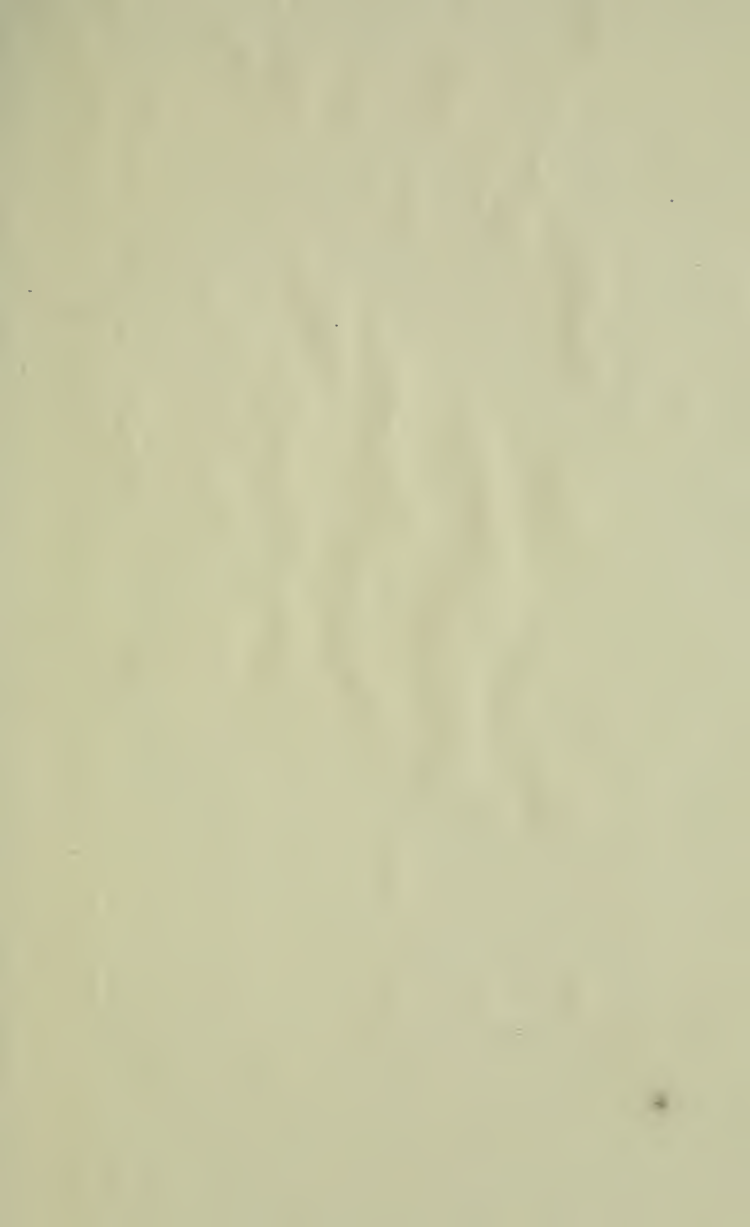
"But, John, surely you're not going to let Honor have her way? You're never going to allow—"

"Mother," broke in John impetuously—so impetuously that Mrs. Beacham's heart was hardened thereby more than ever against the absent cause of her son's very novel act of disrespect; "mother, I repeat what I said before, that there's no earthly use either in abusing Honor or in talking of what can't be helped. As for sending for her, or writing for her, or anything of the kind, that I'm not going to do—not yet awhile, that is. As you said just now, it's only natural that the poor young thing should like a change. We're old people, as you said, mother," he added with a very sad smile, "compared to her, and I begin to think you were right a year and more ago, when you said that Honor was too young a wife for me. There's a good many more gray hairs in my head, mother, than should be owned by my little girl's husband. And then there's her father, d——n him!" and John's big fist came so heavily down upon the table that his mother almost trembled for the safety of her cups and saucers; "I know him to be as great a villain as ever stepped in shoe-leather; but, as I've often said before, he is *her* father; and being that he's about the only relation that she's got, it's only natural, I

suppose, that she should hold to him. Ah me! That was a black day for all of us when he stirred me up to give him the bad blow that floored him. But for that, I should be a different man, mother, from what I am this day. If I'd said it at the first, if I hadn't been a party to the fellow's lie, I should stand on the old ground, mother, and that was better ground than what's under my feet to-day; but I hoped, so I did, that the secret—Honor's secret—would be kept. I little thought that the fellow had a purpose all the while in what he did; I little thought that Honor—but I am a fool, a downright idiot, to go on in this way! I couldn't be worse if I was a lad of twenty, with nothing to think of in life but girls and their foolishness!" and John, who during the utterance of these self-condemning sentences had been pacing with hurried and heavy footsteps to and fro in the room, suddenly took himself off to his out-of-door business, letting—contrary to his wont, for he was rarely deficient in respect to his mother—the door of the little parlour close with a bang behind his retreating footsteps.

END OF VOL. II.





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA

823 H817S C001 v.2

Sink or swim? : a novel /



3 0112 088985806